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By JACKSON COLE

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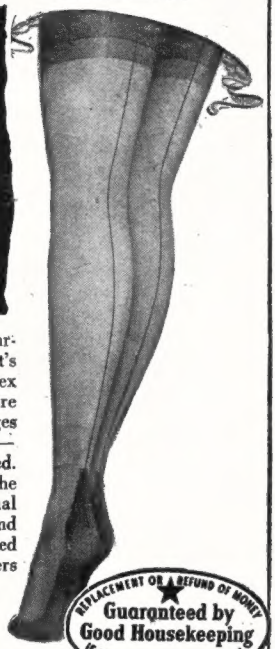

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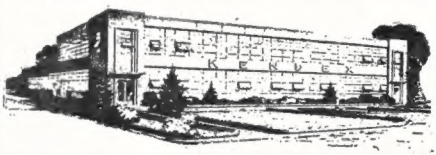

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TEXAS RANGERS

VOLUME 40, NUMBER 3 A THRILLING PUBLICATION NOVEMBER, 1950

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Land of Violent Men

By Jackson Cole

When a fence war is brewing in Sundust Valley, Texas Ranger Jim Hatfield uses both brains and shooting irons in a fighting effort to keep the feud from boiling up into a gun thunder storm! *11*

SHORT STORIES

GUNS OF THE DEATH RAIDERS.....*by Johanas L. Bouma* *56*
There's but one way for Jeff Nielson to leave the owlhoot—via gunsmoke

LONG SAM MAKES A STAKE.....*by Lee Bond* *67*
Gaunt Outlaw Littlejohn meets murder, robbery, and a damsel in distress!

SHERIFF'S RAFFLE.....*by Joseph F. Hook* *77*
Sam Sawyer admitted he had brains—but Shotgun Shadwell had his doubts

ONE VERY GOOD AMIGO.....*by Clifton Adams* *84*
Texas Ranger Matthew Duquesne takes the trail of a wanted Border bandit

FEATURES

THE FRONTIER POST.....*by Captain Starr* *6*
A friendly get-together confab for readers, plus announcements and letters

SCOURGE OF THE SAN SABA.....*by Harold Preece* *62*
The true story of Little Will Preece, a young Ranger of astonishing valor

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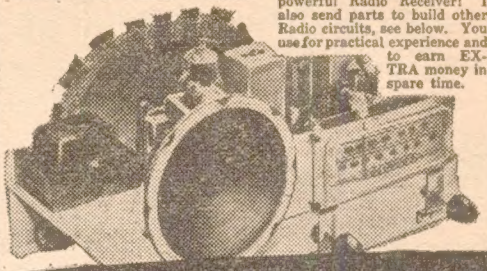

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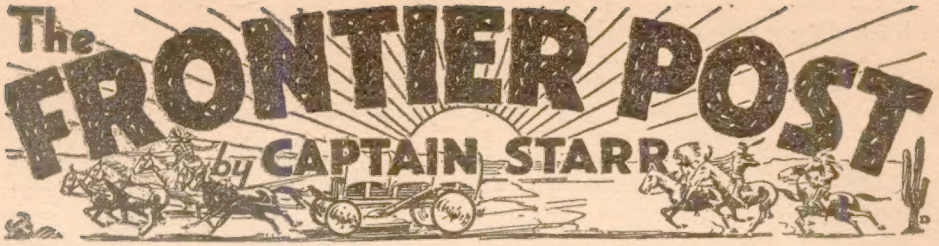

HIYA, gals and galluses! Maybe you've noticed that most fights start from insignificant causes. It's also true that most wars grow out of foolish fights. The study of any period of world history proves that. You can't find more convincing examples than the bloody range wars, from Texas west. The smallest smidge of plain common sense would have settled them all peaceably, before they started.

It isn't fully clear, even today, just how the Lincoln County War and the Pleasant Valley War started. But it's mighty plain that neither of those murderous orgies settled any issue that two sensible, coolheaded men couldn't have settled in one smoke, while perched together on a corral fence.

The Lincoln County (Wyoming) War started in the spring of 1892 and ended about one year later with a farcical trial in which nobody was punished or even held responsible for the score of violent deaths.

What was it all about? A rash and misguided effort to rid the Big Horn area of cattle rustlers. The pathetic part of it was that NONE of the dead were rustlers! At least, not a one had been tried and convicted as such, by any process of law.

A Neighborhood Squabble

The Pleasant Valley (Arizona) War had even a smaller beginning. It started in 1884 with a minor neighborhood squabble between two ranch families, the Tewksburys and the Grahams.

The feud raged until 1892, when the last Graham was shot in the back, and the last Tewksbury was jailed for murder. The charge was eventually dismissed, so nobody paid the law's penalty for the estimated 20 gun killings. Ed Tewksbury, last of his clan, incredible as it seems, finished out his days as an officer of the law, in Globe.

There are many accounts of these two tragic events, and the accounts vary in some particulars. As nearly as can be told, from sifting and comparing these various accounts, the Lincoln County War climaxed the long, bitter struggle between the big beef barons and the humble pioneer homesteaders. One thing is certain. That is, there were righteous-minded and honest men in both factions, yet both committed flagrant wrongs.

It all started one crisp day in April, 58 years ago, when a special Union Pacific train pulled out of Denver for Cheyenne. The train was made up of six cars and a caboose. There were three stock cars, containing 50 horses, a flat car loaded with three Studebaker wagons, a baggage car filled with saddles, provisions and enough guns, ammunition, strychnine poison and dynamite to annihilate the entire population of the State of Wyoming.

Murderous Mobsters

There was also a chair car, crammed full with the finest collection of cutthroats, desperadoes and hired gunhands ever to be assembled anywhere!

This murderous mob had been recruited and the train was chartered by a group of big cattlemen for the avowed purpose of stamping out range thieving. It was made up largely of renegades and fugitives, driven out of Texas and elsewhere. Though in fairness it must be stated that among them were fair and honorable men, whose only guilt was that of taking the law into their own hands.

A good many of these wisely removed themselves, once they saw what they had let themselves in for.

Inquisitive persons were herded away from the train at Cheyenne and other stops, and by the time it reached Casper, at the foot of the Big Horns, it carried 52 boisterous, bloodthirsty men.

Vengeance Rides

The invasion of that rustlers' paradise was on! Vengeance rode to the big kill. Word

of the invasion spread over thinly-settled Wyoming and with it terror and panic among the poor and defenseless homesteaders.

The conflict had been brewing since the coming of the first settlers. The cattle kings, who until then had monopolized the open range, resented the intrusion, for it foreshadowed the end of big, easy profits. From Texas and the middle prairies they had brought great herds. Calves, born and raised on free grass, sold for around $50 a head in four or five years.

So little wonder these monopolists tried every card in the deck to freeze out the small fry. They used trickery and fraud, they bluffed and bullied, and they accused the nesters of stealing and branding strays. Many nesters undoubtedly did get their start in just such fashion. But they maintained, with some truth, that the big operators had done the same, and their rustlings were largely in reprisal for audacious raids on their own small herds.

Five Lynchings

In a few months preceding the "Wyoming invasion", five settlers had been ruthlessly lynched and ambushed. Some of these unquestionably deserved punishment, because the influx of settlers had brought the usual assortment of scoundrels and reprobates.

But at least one of the victims was an upright citizen, and he was murdered under such dramatic circumstances that it aroused fury among small ranchers. John A. Tisdale, who had been a companion of Theodore Roosevelt, and a man of excellent reputation who had never been charged or even suspected of rustling, was waylaid and killed when driving a supply-loaded wagon to his Powder River ranch. His body was found, sprawled among blood-splashed Christmas toys he had bought for his children.

This was the state of affairs when the invasion train reached Casper, in violation of the Wyoming law which expressly forbid bringing any police force or armed body into the state to do or suppress violence.

After brief preliminaries, such as cutting telegraph and telephone lines, the invaders detrained, saddled horses, loaded wagons and took off for campaign headquarters on a big ranch on the south fork of Powder River.

Their first raid was on a small spread called KC Ranch, where they killed two men

[*Turn page*]

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and captured two others, who were trappers stopping over at the KC spread, and noncombatants.

A Tough Hombre

One of the pair killed was a cowhand from Texas named Nathan D. Champion. He was one tough hombre, this Champion, who had survived a similar attack in which he wounded and stampeded his two attackers.

Champion did not die easy. He had seen his companion, an old, unarmed, defenseless man slaughtered in the doorway that morning without warning when he went out for a bucket of water. His two trapper guests were prisoners. Alone in the ranch cabin, he fought off a swarm of attackers all day—until night, when they set fire to the cabin and riddled him with lead as he dashed from the devouring flames.

He did a remarkably nervy thing, this Champion. He wrote a diary, describing the whole hopeless battle. He coolly added notes as bullets whizzed through the log walls. That diary, later found, inspired a range ballad that cowboys sing to this day.

An Army of Defense

The Champion diary aroused nesters and townspeople as much or more than the Tisdale outrage. Quickly, under the dauntless leadership of the Johnson County Sheriff, "Red" Angus, they organized an army of defense that greatly outnumbered the invaders.

They surrounded the invaders, in the act of another raid, who abjectly surrendered, were jailed for awhile, and turned loose. Only a few ringleaders were formally charged. The case was dropped "for lack of witnesses," the two trappers having been kidnapped and spirited out of the state. The "Wyoming invasion" cost the big cattlemen more than $100,000. Some gunhands were paid $1000 apiece for their part in the fiasco.

That was the end of mass violence in Johnson County. Rustling abated. Big stockmen and small ranchers eventually learned to get along together, as they do now.

Brand Battle

Arizona's Pleasant Valley War was a muddled affair. It sprang out of personal grudges instead of a community issue. It started with a wrangle over ownership of a cattle brand,

between the Tewksburys and Grahams. But before it ended, many others were drawn into it.

A New Englander, John D. Tewksbury, settled in Pleasant Valley, in the Tonto Basin of mid-Arizona, in 1880, bringing his wife and three halfbreed sons—Ed, John and Jim.

Tom and John Graham came in 1882, settling about 10 miles from the Tewksburys.

The three Tewksbury boys and the Graham brothers rode range for big spreads in the region, gradually accumulating a herd of their own. The question arose whether they legally owned the cattle they claimed. A rancher all had worked for, named Stinson, claimed they rustled most of their stock from him. All five were charged several times with stealing cattle.

The blowup came when one of the Grahams registered the joint ownership brand under his own name. About this time, a family named Blevans—father and five sons—sided with the Grahams. One of them, Andy, was a bad hombre, wanted in Indian Territory for selling firewater to Indians, in Texas for a killing and also was under indictment in Apache County, Arizona, for rustling.

Sheep in Pleasant Valley

The Tewksburys, having lost their interest in the cattle they had helped the Grahams accumulate, became sheep-minded. In 1886, over the Tonto Rim, sheep poured into Pleasant Valley, to the consternation of all cattlemen, because it was in violation of an agreement among them all.

The Tewksburys were back of the sheep deal, though the sheep were owned by the two Daggs brothers. Their bands were hazed and shot and the Daggses were threatened until finally they pulled out with what was left of their woollies.

But the bitterness remained. When the sheep were gone, the feudists and their followers started shooting up one another. The clashes were many. There were sneak shootings and open duels. First a Tewksbury was downed, then a Graham. One death called for another, in the way of those sordid, incessant feuds.

Long-Haired Sheriff

There was just one creditable episode that shed glory on anybody. The hero was not

(Continued on page 92)

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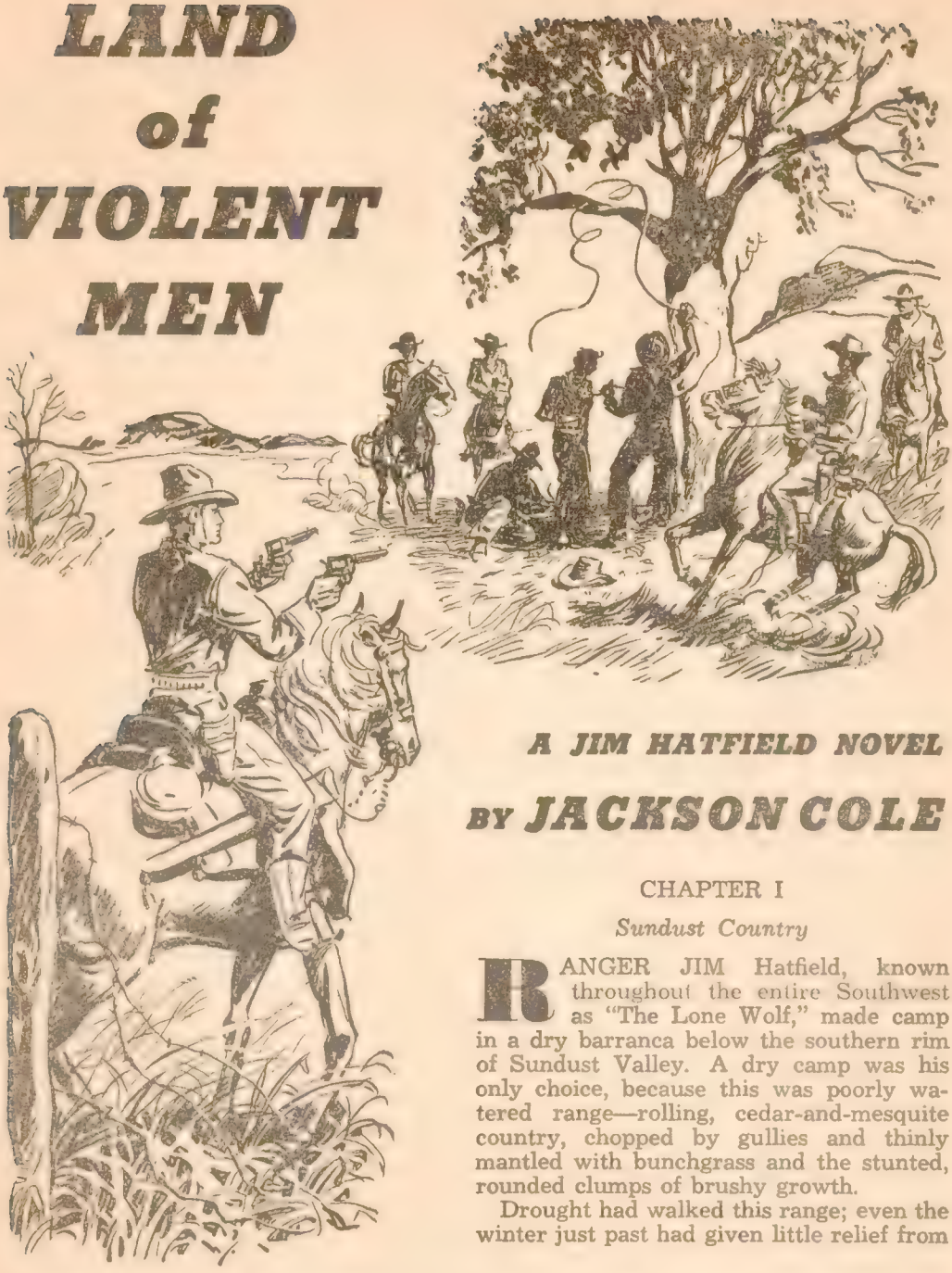
LAND of VIOLENT MEN



A JIM HATFIELD NOVEL

BY JACKSON COLE

CHAPTER I

Sundust Country

RANGER JIM Hatfield, known throughout the entire Southwest as "The Lone Wolf," made camp in a dry barranca below the southern rim of Sundust Valley. A dry camp was his only choice, because this was poorly watered range—rolling, cedar-and-mesquite country, chopped by gullies and thinly mantled with bunchgrass and the stunted, rounded clumps of brushy growth.

Drought had walked this range; even the winter just past had given little relief from

When a fence war's brewing in Sundust Valley, a Ranger uses wits and weapons to keep it from boiling up into a raging gun thunder storm!

Jim Hatfield's Guns Roar for Justice When a

the effects of smashing, summer-long heat. The grass roots, here, had bathed in a different kind of moisture—human blood.

Northward, there was water in plenty —the broad, shining scimitar-stroke of the Sundust River. Hatfield could see it, flowing off there across the rolling miles in dusk-laden stillness. But he could see, as well, the faintly gleaming line of a sharp-fanged barricade that stood between that life-giving stream and a parched and thirsty land. Two-strand wire—barbed wire.

The fences were going up across Texas. With them, they had brought bloody war.

His mind was heavy with these thoughts, and with the grim mission that had called him here, as he offsaddled and turned his handsome golden sorrel loose to roll and graze on the scant grass cover. An imposing figure of a man, this Hatfield—tall even in a land of tall men, lath-lean, wide of shoulder. Twin Frontier-model Colts snugged his slim waist in carefully fashioned, hand-made holsters. His gray-eyed face bronzed by many suns held a keen-edged intelligence; there was no waste motion about him, but a quick sureness in everything he did.

The night was crisp with the early season and he piled mesquite fuel on the fire he built. Then, breaking out his trail equipment, he poured a handful of coffee beans on a flat stone and set this mixture on the fire to brew. That done, he sliced bacon, afterward cleaning his case-knife by stabbing it into the dirt, and soon the aroma of sizzling meat and steaming coffee lifted pleasantly upon the early darkness.

Finished eating, Hatfield put his back against a rock and looked out across the sleeping valley, and at the stars overhead that were dimmed by the leaping glow of his fire.

He didn't have to be camping out tonight, if he didn't want to. There was a town back yonder a piece that he had ridden through earlier in his casual and unheralded inspection of the Sundust. But Jim Hatfield was not too fond of towns, and he hadn't much liked the looks of that one. There had been hostility, suspicion in every face he had noted, built up by the months-old war that held this range in its grip.

SITTING there now, he found himself thinking of the wagon train he had overtaken and passed yesterday. A dozen tilt-topped, canvas-shrouded emigrant rigs, filled with men and women and children and the tools of farming, and headed—so their leader had told him —for the Sundust. By tomorrow, probably, they would arrive. And what would their coming add to the conflict raging between "free-grass" and "pasture" men, who had already left their dead beside that barbed-wire barricade yonder?

One Texas Ranger had died here— "Buck" Norman—as good a man as ever pinned the star-and-circle shield of the constabulary to his shirt front. At least, it was almost certain that Buck was dead. Hatfield believed so, as did his chief, Captain Bill McDowell. Only death could silence a Ranger, and there had been no report from Buck since he had ridden to Sundust two months ago. Part of Hatfield's job would be to trace him, to find some clue to his disappearance. And if Buck Norman had been deliberately killed, that meant Hatfield would be inviting death himself every moment he spent here.

Pondering all these things, he leaned to toss another handful of fuel onto the smoldering fire. It was at that moment he heard the riders in the night.

It sounded like a considerable bunch of horsemen, and they were taking the star-dim ground at a good clip. Coming nearer, steadily. Jim Hatfield let the fire alone and, easing quickly to his feet, moved back a little into the shadows.

Over eastward, the bright nimbus of a rising moon stood upon the horizon. It was against this fan of golden light that the shapes of riders showed, all at once, topping out of a shallow-sided draw and drumming in through the stunted cedar growth. A half-dozen, Hatfield counted. They came straight toward the fire, and he waited with a hand resting cautiously on the butt of a holstered gun.

The horsemen reined in and a film of

dust, hoof-raised, thinned away on a ground breeze. The big man in the forefront of the riders curbed down a restless bronc and threw his harsh challenge at the tall stranger, half-hidden in the shadows:

"Stand still there—whoever you are! We aim to talk to you."

"Whoever *you* are," Hatfield retorted coldly, "I don't think I want you any closer!"

But he spoke too late, for already the horsemen had swirled about his camp and had him in their center, with his fire

JIM HATFIELD

and his saddle and blanket roll beside him. Hatfield, taut and watchful, kept his hand on his gun, but he did not make the mistake of trying to pull it.

"I wouldn't advise you to give any trouble," the leader said. "Just answer our questions and answer 'em straight."

He was a bulky man, barrel-chested, red-bearded. In the fire glow his eyes looked small and mean, and crowded close against the bridge of a flattened nose. There was something wrong with his way of speaking, Hatfield noticed, a kind of slurring thickness that made the words hard to understand.

Hatfield's continued silence seemed to irritate the big man. "You got a name, I reckon?" the fellow said sharply.

"I've got one," the Ranger agreed. "I use it for private business."

Someone in the circle mouthed a curse. The redbeard pushed his Stetson back with a broad thumbnail, leaned forward with elbow crooked across saddle pommel.

"Now listen, feller! No sense invitin' grief! Maybe you ain't heard, but there's a war goin' on in these parts. And any stranger that we ain't sure is on our side, we're apt to figure he must be on the other. Especially when he's the kind who talks back!"

"Aw, why don't we go ahead and search his stuff?" another of the riders growled. "That's the quickest way to settle it."

"Any man that touches—" Jim Hatfield began tightly.

BEHIND him a gun-barrel whispered against leather.

"We'll do what we come for, mister," the redbearded leader told him shortly, "and there's a gun on your back if you don't like it! Lemme tell you what's what! I'm Virgil Massey, range boss of the CCC, the big spread in this valley. It's our fence you maybe seen yonder. There's a bunch of greasy-sack outfits and cattle thieves that aim to tear that fence down. We've killed some of 'em tryin' it, and they've killed Triple C riders in return. We aim to put a stop to it. We've given warnin' that any rider we find crossin' this range with a pair of wirecutters in his saddle-pockets, we'll tie 'em around his neck and string him to the nearest tree. An example, savvy, for the rest of 'em!"

A chill touched Hatfield's spine. He had known that things were out of control, here in the Sundust country, but not that it had reached such a stage as this.

With a gun on his back, however, he couldn't argue.

"All right, Link!" grunted Massey, jerking his head at the other rider who had spoken. "You wanted him searched. Hop to it.!"

Hatfield stood with thumbs hooked idly

into waistband. Amid a tense silence, the man called Link handed his reins to a companion and stepped down, in a squeal of saddle leather, to begin his search.

Swiftly but efficiently he went through Jim Hatfield's belongings, tearing apart his bedroll, pawing through his saddlebags, but of course not turning up the wire snips which would have been the stranger's ticket to a hangrope had any been found. He did not neglect to frisk the man himself, slapping the Ranger's pockets briefly before he stepped back and shook his head at the redbeard.

"He's clean, Virg."

Massey had sat unmoving, during this, leaning a thick forearm on the saddle pommel. Now he straightened, and the firelight showed a scowl on his heavy features.

"Lucky for him!" His little eyes rested corrosively on Hatfield's dark face. Plainly he was still dissatisfied. "You sure you don't want to tell us who you are, and what business you got on this range?"

"No, I don't," Hatfield said.

He wasn't ready yet to reveal his identity to anyone, here on the Sundust. A ranger's shield had not saved Buck Norman. Jim Hatfield had his own hidden away in a secret pocket of his jeans waistband, and he meant to keep it there. It looked like the safest way.

Massey grunted. "Was I you, mister, I don't reckon I'd stick long around these parts. Get in our way, and Triple C ain't apt to put itself out any, tryin' to tell you apart from these fence-cutting snakes we're fightin'."

"Two guns on him!" the man called Link observed darkly. "I'm thinking he's some gunman or other they've brought in to use against us."

"Could be. Could be, at that!" Virgil Massey seemed impressed by the idea. "Yeah, maybe I'll change what I said, mister. It was a suggestion—now it's an order! You get off this grass by morning. If I find you haven't, I don't promise what—"

"Hey, Virg!" someone cried out. *"Listen!"*

Talking chopped off abruptly. Across the crisp night stillness there came, plainly now, a staccato crackling of sound carried on the wind.

"Gunfire!" exploded Virg Massey. "At the fence! Sounds like a full-scale raid!"

With a curse he yanked reins, pulling his big bronc around. Then he had slapped the steel to the mount and was going away from there, his men spurring after him. Jim Hatfield had been forgotten utterly, in this sudden break of violence. Link threw himself into leather and went pounding after the rest. In a moment the Ranger was left there by the dying campfire, amid the scatter of his ravaged belongings, as he listened to the CCC riders tearing away across the treacherous, broken ground.

But for an instant only. After that, he was turning to send out a shrill, piercing whistle and summon the great golden sorrel to his side.

CHAPTER II

Hangnoose Cheat

QUICKLY Jim Hatfield had his things gathered together, his saddle pack built. As Goldy came trotting out of the darkness he threw blanket and gear on the sorrel, moving with unhurried but swiftly sure agility. Last of all he kicked out the fire and scattered the embers, then he was in saddle and saying:

"Trail, Goldy!"

He had come here to get into this war and it looked as if he had hit squarely in the middle of it, the very first night!

The sorrel needed no spur other than the sharp urgency of his rider's voice. Quickly he was off, running powerfully over the dark and uneven ground, and with the crackling of distant gunfire the goal toward which he pointed.

The big, ivory ball of a Texas moon had tipped across the eastern horizon now and it sent its light running liquidly along the rolling and broken face of the land, pointing up in sharp shadow the contours of brush and coulee and making it easier for Goldy to pick his running course. Steadily he bore Jim Hatfield in toward the bloody drama being enacted at the fence.

Guns were winking like fireflies, fitful and persistent, and the wind fanning the Ranger's slit-eyed, bronzed features

brought to him distinctly the mingled crackle of their fire. There was also the yells of men, the suddenly spine-chilling scream of a horse mortally bullet-struck.

And then Hatfield could begin to discern the pattern of the fight, could make out the shape of violence.

Plainly, the raiders had been caught by surprise, between the guard at the fence and the bunch of CCC riders Virgil Massey now brought sweeping in from southward. Already they were breaking up before these odds.

Their attack had been turned into a milling confusion. They were giving battle as best they could, but even as Jim Hatfield pounded nearer he saw that the fight was ending, as quickly as it had begun. The fence cutters, trapped, were seeking to pull free, though still keeping up their gunplay as they took refuge in flight.

Hatfield reined in at some distance, checking the restless Goldy. This was nothing for him to take a hand in. The retreat of the beaten fence cutters was a complete rout, by now. In a straggle of panicked mounts, and lacking any formation, they streamed off at a gallop, heading toward the nearest brakes at the valley rim. But when some of the CCC riders started to give chase, Virg Massey called them off, harsh voice sounding above the rest of the racket.

"Let the skunks go! Don't try to go after them, you hear? They'll just lead you into a trap and turn on you!"

His men saw the sense of that and held back, sending a few final bullets winging after their enemies. Then, a dark and milling group under the moon glow, they gathered about Massey while the range boss checked with his fence guards on just what had happened.

Their excited talk reached Hatfield, clearly. Apparently this had been the biggest raid yet to hit the fence and only the timely arrival of Massey's group had foiled it. A couple of panels of the taut-strung wire had been torn out before help arrived. In the mêlée, one CCC man had taken a slug in the shoulder; another had lost his mount. That seemed to be the worst of the damage, other than a minor bullet scratch or two.

"Seems to me I noticed that Tom Dakins hombre, among the rest," somebody

The Colt six-shooter described a flashing arc, hard, against the man's skull (CHAP. IV)

said. "Looked like the build of him, anyway, in the saddle."

"Dakins!" Massey's voice, echoing the name, was dangerous. "He was warned what would happen if he gave in and joined up with them fence cutters! He'll find out pretty quick we meant it! He—"

He was interrupted by a shout: "Hey! Hey, Virg! Here's one of the skunks! Must have been knocked off his mount!"

ALL at once men were piling out of saddle, to surround a still figure sprawled upon the moonlit earth. Virg Massey came spurring in.

"Lemme look at him!" he grunted. "Is he dead?"

"No—just stunned, it looks like. He's commencing to rouse."

"It's the Welsh kid!" another man's voice exclaimed.

Massey uttered a whoop of savage triumph. "The ring leader, himself! This is plumb lucky. We'll make an example out of him the rest of his wire-clipping friends ain't likely ever to forget!"

"Here's the cutters he was using," another man announced. "Still in his hand."

"He'll go out with 'em tied around his neck," grunted Massey. "That was our promise!" He stood in stirrups, sent a look around the moonlit flat. "Where's a tree?"

Hatfield knew then that he was going to have to interfere. With one of the matched Colts sliding into his fingers, he kneed Goldy carefully forward, melting out of the black brush-shadow which had concealed him.

The CCC crowd had their victim on his feet by this time and were dragging him, stumbling and only half-conscious, toward the gaunt shape of a leafless cottonwood some sixty feet away from the fence, at the lip of a dry arroyo. The moon's brightness was such that details seemed to stand forth almost as clearly as by day.

The prisoner, who had been called Welsh, stood on the ground beneath the tree swaying weakly in the hands of two men who gripped his arm to hold him upright. They had taken his gun, but had not touched the knife he wore in a scabbard at his belt. A pair of wire snips dangled across his chest, where his captors had slung them. They had a rope around his neck and as Hatfield came cantering in were throwing the loose end of it over a stout, horizontal limb and pulling it tight.

Virgil Massey, leaning forward in saddle, spoke to the condemned man.

"Well, Kid! I guess you know what's gonna happen to you. Or did you think we was only bluffin' when we said what we'd do with the next fence-cuttin' skunk that fell into our hands alive?"

"I knew you meant it!" The young fellow was fully conscious now, and his voice as he answered was shaky, but not from fear of the fate that loomed ahead of him. He showed plenty of nerve, talking back to these enemies who had him completely at their mercy. "An outfit that would fence cattle away from grass and water they need wouldn't think anything of killin' the men who own them. You've killed enough of us, already. What difference if you do it with a gunshot from the shadows, or at the end of a rope?"

Massey grunted again. "Cocky young hellion, ain't you?" He straightened, nodded to his men. "Get on with it! Pull away!"

"No!" snapped a new and unexpected voice. "The thing ends right here!"

With startled exclamations, every man there whipped about and stared at Jim Hatfield, astride Goldy, a leveled Colt filling each slender hand. It was Virgil Massey who first found his tongue.

"You, again!" he demanded wrathfully. "Just what do you think you're up to, this time, stranger? You wouldn't be foolish enough to buy into a thing that's none of your cussed business?"

"A lynching is anybody's business," Hatfield said coldly. "I don't claim to know the right or the wrong in this quarrel but I can't sit by and watch your method of settling it."

The man called Link said tightly: "Looks like we shoulda settled *you*, mister, back yonder by the fire! A warning wasn't enough to keep you out of trouble!"

"Does seem that way, doesn't it?" agreed Hatfield grimly. "The lot of you stand tight or there'll be more trouble." He called to the prisoner: "You, feller! You able to make it?"

"Yeah!" answered young Welsh. "Just get these lobos off me—"

HE SHOOK loose of the hands that held him. Despite their numbers, and the deceptive quality of the moonlight that would make accurate shooting difficult, these CCC gunmen seemed reluctant to make a play in the face of Hatfield's drawn weapons. The stranger was an unknown quantity, and he had surprised them once already. They weren't eager further to test his capacity for danger.

So they held tight, and the prisoner hastily stripped the hangnoose from about his own throat. The wire-cutters still dangled at his neck but he ignored them, in his haste to get away from that place where he had thought to draw his last agonized breath. As he stumbled forward Jim Hatfield told the rest:

"Everybody out of saddle—and I'll shoot at the first suspicious move!"

For a moment it looked as though they might be going to give him an argument. No one stirred to obey his order. Hatfield switched his glance to the range boss then, and placed a gun muzzle squarely on the man's thick shape.

"All right, Massey!" he rapped. "I don't figure on a chase when I leave here. I'm giving you the count of three, to light down off that bronc and tell your men to do the same . . . *One!*"

Silence that was complete except for the hoarse breathing of angry men clamped over that scene. Every eye narrowed on Hatfield, and on the CCC range boss. Whatever Massey chose to do, they would follow. Hatfield saw this plainly, and he knew it was up to him to break the big man's nerve.

If Massey defied him, or made a play for a gun, then there was small chance of coming through this. But if Massey could be bluffed out—

"Two!"

At the flat crack of his voice, the tense quiet seemed to knot up tight about them. Time was running out. With the next count the thing would be determined.

But Massey decided not to wait for the count. At the last minute he broke. Lifting a thick leg across the saddle he came down into the dust. Immediately, with an escape of trapped breath that sounded like a heavy sigh, the rest of the men quickly—almost eagerly—followed him. Leather squealed as they all swung to earth.

Welsh was at Hatfield's side.

"Up behind me!" the Ranger told him. "Quick!"

As the rescued prisoner hauled himself onto Goldy's back, Hatfield punched three shots from his guns into the night, firing above the heads of the CCC horses. The broncs, already spooked by the gunfighting at the fence, erupted into a madness of squealing and pitching, some even tearing loose from their cursing riders to split and scatter. And during this moment of confusion, Hatfield hauled Goldy around and sent the big sorrel away from there, at a quick gallop.

Immediately, guns leaped to life back by the hangtree. A bullet sliced the air, a yard or two wide of the fleeing golden horse with its double burden. But in seconds Hatfield and Welsh were out of range, and it would take the CCC crew much too long to get their mounts under control and hit saddle again, for them to hope to overtake the Ranger's sorrel.

For already Goldy was burning up the night on a line that led directly toward the broken rim country. Once there, Hatfield knew, they should be safe and able to shake off pursuit.

"Hang on!" he called to the man behind him. And settled to putting distance between them and the disgruntled lynchers.

CHAPTER III

Sinister Allies

WHEN Hatfield finally brought Goldy to a stand, it was in a sheltered pocket of the hills where moonlight failed to enter. He tested the silence, detected nothing other than the normal night sounds. Satisfied, Hatfield swung down to let the great sorrel have a needed rest, and turned to the man clinging behind the saddle.

"Kid?"

"I'm doing fine." Welsh's voice was a little unsteady, and marked with fatigue. He slipped from Goldy's back and Hatfield put out a hand to steady him. "Still

kind of shaky," the young fellow said gruffly. "I guess I took a bad wallop on the skull when my hoss threw me."

He wandered off and Hatfield loosened the cinches and slipped Goldy's bit. Then the Ranger followed young Welsh and found him sitting with his back against a rock, head hanging, his entire body limp.

Jim Hatfield let himself down beside Welsh.

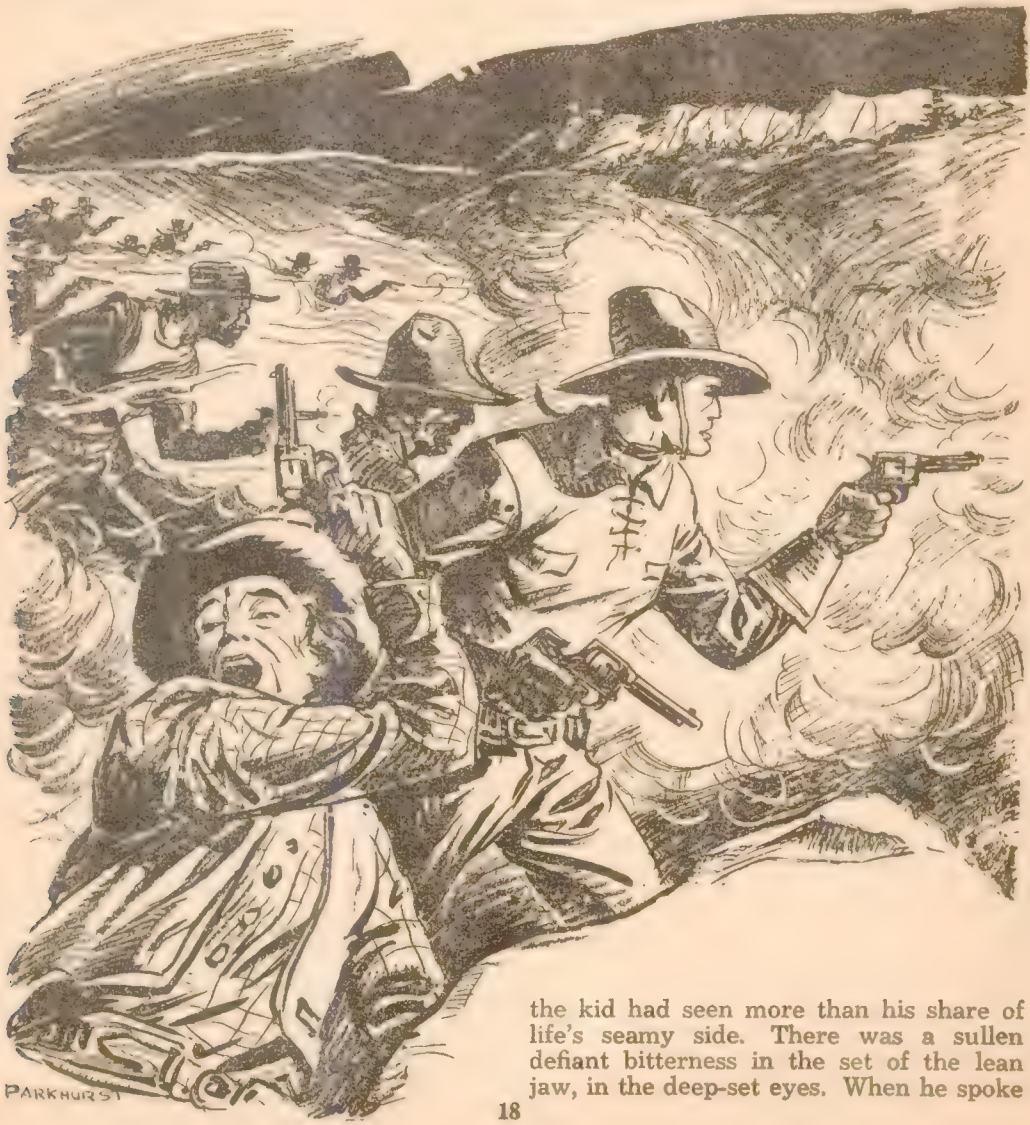
"Just go easy for a few minutes," he told him, "and you'll be all right. We're out of danger now."

His hands were busy with tobacco and papers. He rolled a quirly, stuck it between firm lips and dug up a match to light it. When he had it going he passed it over to the other man.

"Thanks," muttered Welsh, and dragged at the tobacco smoke gratefully.

The glow of the cigarette showed his features and Hatfield studied them. He saw a young face, but one tight with pain and shock, and the horror of what had nearly happened to him.

Hard lines marked that face, as though

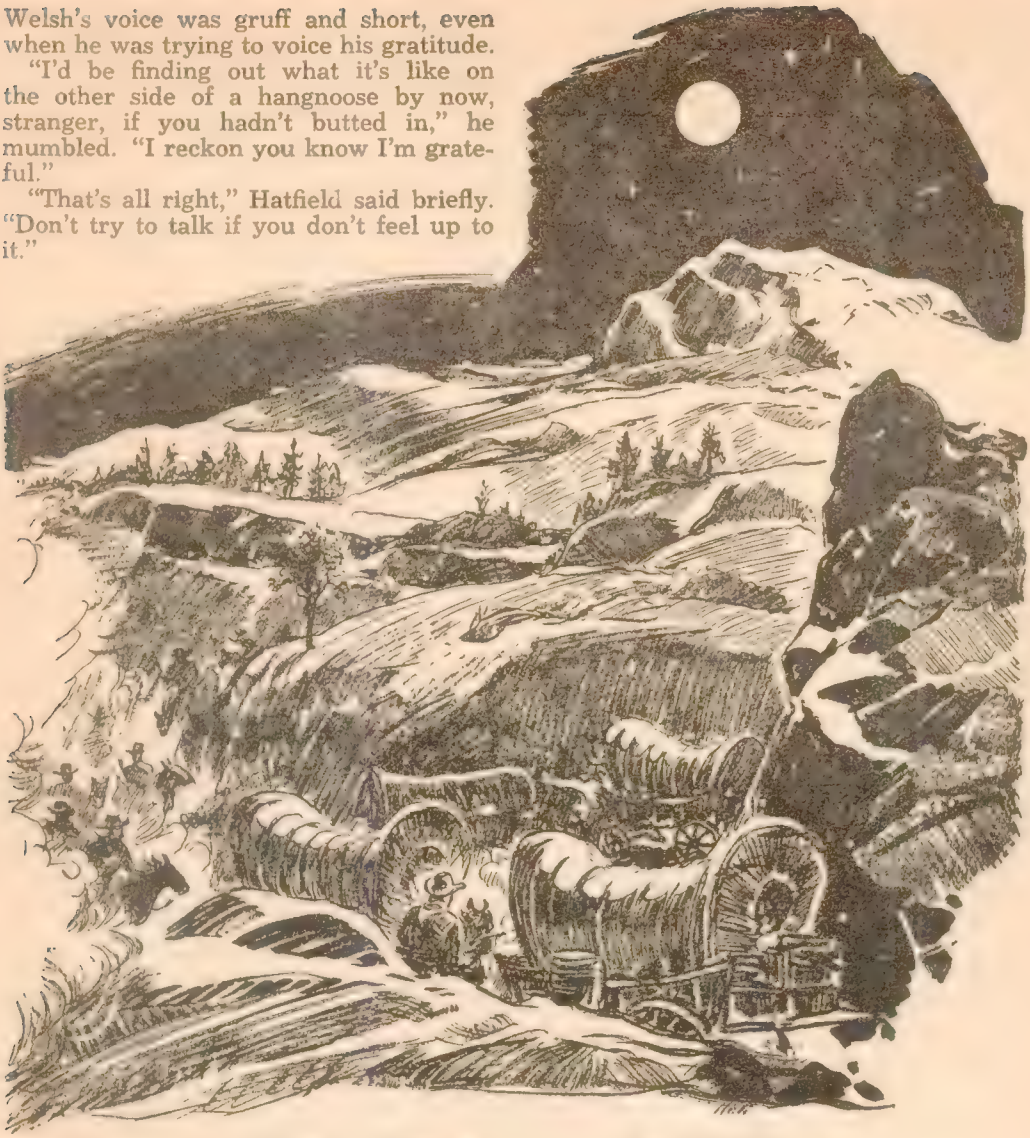


the kid had seen more than his share of life's seamy side. There was a sullen defiant bitterness in the set of the lean jaw, in the deep-set eyes. When he spoke

Welsh's voice was gruff and short, even when he was trying to voice his gratitude.

"I'd be finding out what it's like on the other side of a hangnoose by now, stranger, if you hadn't butted in," he mumbled. "I reckon you know I'm grateful."

"That's all right," Hatfield said briefly. "Don't try to talk if you don't feel up to it."



Colts flaming, Jim Hatfield was in the van of the fight (CHAP. XIV)

Welsh made an impatient gesture. "I can't sit around here like this! I gotta be heading for camp—the rest of the boys will have given me up!"

He made an effort to stand, but it was still too much for him. He settled back, one hand going shakily to his head.

There wasn't any blood, but he'd had a bad enough knock to nauseate him. This, Hatfield knew, would pass.

"No need to crowd yourself," he said. "As soon as you're feeling better, I'll take you on to your camp."

Welsh lifted his head, gave the stranger a sharp look.

"No! You stay out of this, mister!"

"I'm already in it."

"But no need to get any deeper! You got no stake, and Triple C will be out for your hide now. Pull free while you can."

"When I get ready," amended Hatfield.

"Who are you, anyway?" the kid demanded, suddenly.

The Ranger had his answer ready. "Nobody in particular. The name is Jim Haycroft. I came through this Sundust country looking for a riding job. Heard there was some trouble hereabouts, but had no idea that it had got to anything like this! It's pretty bad, I guess."

"Bad enough!" Welsh's young face was grim. He plucked the cigarette from his lips, scowled at its glowing end. "That Clant Calder!"

"Calder?"

"He owns the Triple C, with Massey to do his dirty work for him. Actually, all Calder holds title to is no more'n a couple sections of bottom land, including what his headquarters buildings is on. The rest of it is public graze—but that don't stop him puttin' his blasted wire across it and keepin' his neighbors away from the river flats!"

HATFIELD nodded, and spoke a little regretfully.

"And so you're out to destroy the fence? Seems to me it would have been better to fight when it was being built. Kind of late to start now."

"We wasn't strong enough to fight—not against hired guns like Massey brought with him when he signed to ride for Calder. There wasn't enough of us, and we had no leader, no organization. My dad—" Hatfield thought the youngster's voice hung a second, choking a little over the word. "Dad tried hard to bring the rest of the small-tally ranches together. So one night Massey raided our place, the Flyin' W. They burnt us out. They killed Dad and my brother, John. They run off every head of Flyin' W beef. I got away into the hills with my life, but just barely—and with a bullet in me. Took me three months to mend."

Hatfield saw the rest of the story. "I suppose," he said, "by that time, the fence was already built. So you set yourself to carry on the fight that had cost your father his life. It would look as though Triple C's enemies are well enough organized, by now. You did that?"

"And why not? I got nothin' to lose. My folks are dead, everything we owned is gone. But I can still break Triple C—and I'm goin' to!"

His hand clenched, as though he would crush between his fingers the enemy who had ruined and embittered his youth.

"How old are you, Kid?" Hatfield said quietly, into a moment's silence. "Nineteen, maybe?"

"What difference? I'm old enough to shoot a gun, and shoot it straight! I'm old enough to kill Massey, and his boss too! That's all there is left that I want to do, now—that, and wipe their cussed fence off the face of the Sundust!"

Such bitterness wasn't pleasant to see in such a young fellow, but the Ranger couldn't argue with it. He could only understand what had made young Welsh the way he was, and understand his hard feelings.

Hatfield picked a stone from the ground and began juggling it idly in his slender, muscular hands.

"How about the law?" he suggested carefully. "There's the Rangers, for example. Ever thought of calling them in?"

"The Rangers!" Welsh spoke as though the word didn't taste good to him. "One of them tin-plated heroes rode in here a while back, said he was going to look things over and find out where the right of matters lay. He took his look, all right. Then he just cleared out, and we never seen him again. That's what you can expect! The law's for the big man, every time. It don't care how he got big, but once he's up there every office holder from the sheriff on up will help him keep what he's taken!"

"If it looks like that to you," Hatfield said quietly, "you'd seem to be bucking a hopeless proposition. Is it worth while?"

Welsh shrugged. "It's big," he grunted, "but not hopeless. You need organization, and the right kind of help. I've got most of the small ranchers lined solid behind me, now. They savvy that with another year as dry as the last one only the cattle that can get to the river will be able to live on this burnt-out graze. Oh, a few men are still holdin' back—men that are afraid to fight. Like that mealy-mouthed Tom Dakins."

"Dakins?" Hatfield caught up the name. "Some of Massey's riders thought they saw him with you tonight."

"Their eyesight's bad!" Welsh grunted sourly. "Dakins, and three-four others would still let Triple C starve 'em into

ruin rather than fight to save themselves. But we don't need 'em," he added savagely. "We got other help on our side—the kind that really counts!"

"Yes?"

BUT the Kid wouldn't elaborate. Instead, he pushed abruptly to his feet, still unsteady but apparently over the worst of his nausea.

"I gotta get on to camp," he said. "Thanks for everything, Haycroft."

Hatfield rose, too. "I'd as soon take you that far," he offered. "I got nothin' else to do."

For just a moment, the young fellow hesitated. Then reluctantly he said;

"Well, all right. It's sort of a long piece into the brakes for a man afoot, at that."

They pushed on, still riding double. Welsh directed their course, and it was a twisted one. Hatfield was sure no stranger could have located the rendezvous, as well hidden as it was against a chance of surprise.

Finally a leaping glow of campfire showed ahead, and as they came in on it a voice called sharply out of the shadows:

"Declare yourself!"

"It's Welsh," the young man answered. "And a friend. Hold off the guns!"

They rode in. Camp had been made at the base of a tilted sheet of upthrust rock, against which the dance of flames and moving shadows showed grotesquely. Excitement had taken over the place, now. Men crowded forward as the sorrel came into the circle of light.

"Kid!" a man exclaimed. "We missed you in the getaway, and when your hoss came in with an empty saddle we thought they had done for you, sure!"

Dismounting, Welsh said, "They would have, except for this gent. Jim Haycroft, meet my friends!"

Hatfield looked about and quickly took their measure. There were a couple of dozen, all told, many bearing the freshly bandaged marks of their battle with Massey's crew. About half of them, the Ranger figured, were of the Welsh youngster's stripe—the small-tally, "free-grass" ranchers of Sundust, fighting a war to liberate the lands impounded behind Clant Calder's CCC fence. But the rest were something else again.

After his years with the Rangers, Jim Hatfield figured he should know gun toughs when he saw them. So he couldn't miss the sure signs that marked some of these men or the suspicion with which they greeted the arrival of a stranger. He singled out one gun-hung fellow as their probable leader—a short, snake-eyed man whose restless fingers did not stray far from a bonehandled Colt in tied-down holster, as he faced Hatfield in the shifting fire glow. Hatfield had already heard him called "Tug" Downing.

"What's your business, Haycroft?" he said without preface.

"None in particular." The answer was as curt as the question had been.

Downing's hard mouth twisted. "Then maybe you better run along and find some!"

"Now wait just a—" Young Welsh's exclamation was cut off as one of the ranchers, a worried-looking man, put a hand on his arm.

"Tug's right, Kid," this one said. "We're grateful to the gent for what he's done, but it ain't likely he's going to want a part in our war, and if he don't join us then there's no room for him here. He better ride, and forget everything about this camp!"

WELSH frowned, seeing the sense of the argument. Before he could speak Tug Downing cut in, with the same intolerant belligerency:

"Come to think of it, that's not such a good idea either. The real mistake was bringin' him here in the first place!"

"Maybe you want to try holding me?" snapped Hatfield, and his gray-green eyes were level and challenging in the reflected firelight. "Come right ahead and try it!" He turned, speaking to young Welsh without removing his stare from Downing's ugly face. "Kid," he said, "I don't think I like some of these friends of yours. They're what you meant, I guess, when you spoke about the help you had on your side that would really count. But believe me, with this crowd of hard-cases you're heading only for trouble. You'd do better to kick them all out!"

An angry muttering among Downing's group was drowned in Welsh's quick retort.

"I didn't ask your advice, did I?"

"No," said Hatfield, "I guess you didn't. So I won't waste it. I'll be riding, now. After the run-in I had with Massey tonight, it isn't likely I'd do him any favors —such as telling him the location of your camp. But I'm warning you. Anybody who wants to keep me from leaving will have to do it with a bullet!"

CHAPTER IV

Boss of the Triple C

DELIBERATELY Jim Hatfield turned to where Goldy stood, got the stirrup and twisted it to receive his pointed boot toe. A heavy stillness rode on the tail of what he had just said. He knew that every eye in the camp was on him, every nerve tense with the challenge he had laid down.

Still unhurried, he lifted and settled into the leather, his left hand picking the knotted reins from the saddle-horn.

A strangled grunt broke from Tug Downing. "You—"

"Let him go, Tug!"

Young Welsh's voice was sharp, hard, definite. His eyes were dangerous; his hand rested on the sheathed knife hilt at his belt.

Jim Hatfield looked down at the faces of the two, saw Downing's shrug as he subsided. But of one thing he was quite sure—Downing wasn't in the least afraid of this youngster. If he backed down now it was for reasons of policy. He and his toughs were merely playing the small-tally ranchers' game, making use of the conflict for some purpose of their own.

Hatfield as yet had no way of guessing what that purpose might be, but he was certain they would not be in this for anything but profit. Maybe, though, Welsh and his friends knew all this, and cynically figured they could employ such potential dynamite against their enemies without being hurt by it themselves.

Without further words, Jim Hatfield kneed Goldy and the big sorrel started away, at a casual walk—out of the firelight and into the brushy shadows beyond. The challenge he half expected at any moment failed to come. He kept riding, and slowly the knotted muscles of his shoulders ironed out their painful tightness. After that he had left the camp behind and was alone with the moon-filled night—and with his troubled musings over all that he had seen and heard this first night on the Sundust....

Morning laid a new look on the river range, took from it the mysterious patina of moon glow and showed instead its drought-starved tragedy. It showed bleak dry washes, once tributary streams of the winding Sundust, now mere stony-bottomed gashes, marked by the hoofs of thirsty cattle haunting them in search of water which no longer came down from skies that seemed to have forgotten how to rain. It showed grazed-out flats, and the small ranchers' scabby herds that had been through a lean winter and faced no better prospect of filling out their hollow flanks in another dry and blazing summer just ahead.

Jim Hatfield's eyes were filled with these things, and his lean face was grim and hard because of the story they told him, as he rode in toward the gleaming stretch of the CCC wire. After the events of last night, he was in a dangerous mood and not one to brook interference. Reaching the fence, he rode along it a while, looking for a way to get through, but Clant Calder had left precious few openings in the wire.

At last, Hatfield came upon a gate. It stood at a point where a wagon road, plainly marked and obviously once well-traveled, came across the rolling flats as though making for a convenient fording point in the broad, looping Sundust River. The road was not much traveled now, however, because the fence chopped it square in two. The gate was closed, and there was a stout chain and padlock on it.

Jim Hatfield rode close and looked at the lock which barred his way.

"Well," he told the golden sorrel, "I reckon I got the key that will unlock this!" And he slid one of his matched Colts out of leather.

Leaning from saddle, he thrust its muzzle close to the lock and pulled trigger, twice. The gun laid a flat pair of shots across the morning. Goldy flicked his ears but otherwise held steady, unperturbed by the noise.

The lock jerked and swung crazily,

twisted and broke. Hatfield yanked it free and tossed it aside. The chain slid into the dust, and the wide gate swung open under his hand.

AT THE same instant the Ranger became aware of the spatter of sound of a running horse, bearing directly toward him.

Looking up he saw a rider galloping in on the other side of the barrier; a guard, probably. Hatfield had figured there likely would be one somewhere nearby. He had started to holster his smoking six-gun, but instead, he laid it against his thigh, inconspicuously, and waited for the man to reach the gate.

It wasn't any of the CCC gunmen he had tangled with last night, but he was of the same stripe. There was a carbine in a scabbard under his knee and he slid it out, to hold it slanted across his chest as he pulled in and scowled blackly at the stranger, and at the bullet-twisted lock lying on the ground.

"All right, feller!" he said. "You savvy you're in trouble, don't you?"

"Where I come from," said Hatfield, coldly, "it isn't considered good form to block a public road. I didn't see any other way through this one, so I blew a way."

"This road ain't public!" grunted the guard. "Not any more. The Triple C has decided otherwise."

"That decision may be open to argument."

The man sneered. "*You* ain't gonna do any arguing!" He jerked the barrel of the carbine, commandingly. "You wanted in so bad—just come along. We'll let Virg Massey have a look. He'll be curious to know what for you're so anxious to set foot on the Triple C."

Hatfield hesitated just a moment, eyeing the carbine. Then, with apparent meekness, he nudged Goldy and rode across the line, under the thin shadow of the cross-bar, toward the waiting, sneering guard.

But as he drew even with the CCC man, a sudden sharp prod of Hatfield's right boot heel into the sorrel's flank sent Goldy into a sudden sideward leap. Unprepared, the guard let out a squawk and whipped up his carbine—too late! The Ranger's horse crashed against the shoulder of the other mount. Hatfield's left hand reached out and shoved the barrel of the carbine aside, and his right came up holding his own Colt six-shooter. It described a flashing arc, hard, against the man's skull.

The gun thudded solidly, the force of the blow cushioned by the man's battered Stetson. The CCC rider left his carbine in Hatfield's grasp and went limply sideward, falling away from him down the startled bronc's off-side. As the horse skittered away Hatfield spoke to Goldy, steadying him, and reined back to look down at the man who lay, senseless, in the dust of the road with a dribble of blood starting from his nostrils.

Stony of face, Jim Hatfield tossed the carbine into a clump of buckbrush. He didn't bother to close the gate, and he didn't touch the unconscious fence guard. The man would be coming to before long, or some of his friends would find him. Meanwhile, Jim Hatfield was on CCC range now and he meant to have a look at it. He reloaded the two spent chambers of his six-shooter, pouched it, and sent

[*Turn page*]

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Goldy ahead, following the road and with his eyes peeled for any further trouble.

Immediately he noticed a difference between this range and that which lay beyond the fence. The CCC might run a large tally, perhaps twice that of its neighbors combined, yet in spite of drought there was more than enough graze impounded here to support Clant Calder's herds. Nowhere did he see evidence of overfeeding, and the cattle Hatfield looked at appeared well fleshed-out—not at all like the sorry, gaunted animals that drifted across the barren acres outside. By fencing open range, Clant Calder had saved his own herds from calamity—but at the expense of the Sundust's smaller cattlemen.

PRESENTLY Hatfield came into sight of the river. He pulled out of the road, cutting further westward toward a low hill crowned with walnut that gave him a broad view of the shining water and of the alluvial flat across which it made its loops.

He reined up here and made a long survey, a thoughtful look growing in his wide-spaced gray eyes. He marked the buildings and corrals of the CCC which lay over against the tawny wagon road. He considered the layout of the river flat, already tinged with new green even at this point in a dry season.

Hipping over to a comfortable position in the saddle, then, he brought a notebook and pencil from his shirt pocket, thumbed the book to an empty page and began sketching the outline of the river and jotting estimated figures.

So absorbed did he become in this that it was startling to hear a voice at his elbow say drily:

"Somethin' right interestin', feller?"

A spare, tall man stood leaning against a walnut bole, only yards from him. Nearby, a dappled gray gelding stood at graze, reins hooked across the man's arm.

He was almost the size of Hatfield, but considerable older and pounds lighter. He had rounded shoulders, a nose like a hawk's beak, a mouth that was firm-set, and sharp blue eyes shadowed by heavy, grizzled brows. Dressed as he was in range clothing, there nevertheless was something about him that marked him as a cut above the ordinary saddle-worker. Something, in fact, told Jim Hatfield this would be the CCC owner—Clant Calder.

Hatfield flipped the little book shut, pocketed it.

"Just doing a little figuring," he answered blandly. "Irrigation. Seems to be plenty water in the river, down there. No reason, it looks to me, why it shouldn't be possible to spread it out some, so as to cover more of the valley and lick these bad dry years."

The tall man considered him narrowly. "You an engineer, maybe?"

"No. But I understand a little something about such matters. Kind of a hobby with me."

"I see." The man's piercing blue stare was still narrow with speculation as he squinted up at Hatfield. He added suddenly, "Your face don't look familiar. You ain't one of my crew, are you?"

The mounted man quirked an eyebrow. "Don't you even know who rides for you?"

"I let my foreman take care of the hirin'," said the man, whom Hatfield now knew for sure was the CCC boss. "He also takes care of keepin' strangers off this ranch. Looks like I'm goin' to have to ask you who you are, mister, and what you think you're doing, trespassin' inside my fence!"

His arms had been folded across his narrow chest as he leaned casually against the tree trunk. Now he straightened and with the movement there was a gun in one of his bony hands, leveled straight at Hatfield. He had slid it smoothly from a shoulder-holster, hidden beneath the hang of his denim jacket.

Jim Hatfield looked at the gun. It had him fairly covered, but his lean face showed no alarm.

"Just as fair a question might be," he said calmly, "what do you think *you're* doing? This land you've got under wire belongs mostly to the State of Texas. By what right do you claim to keep it for yourself, Calder?"

A gleam kindled in the shadowed eye above the six-gun.

"Nervy gent, ain't you? Well, I'll answer that question! I hold this land by right of the stronger, and by right of being the man who can best use it! If I took down my fence, what do you think would happen? Rustlers would run free over

this grass. Greasy-sack outfits would overrun it with their own scrubby herds, mixin' 'em with my fine breed stock. Nesters would crowd in to file on the school lands, to plow 'em up and ruin the whole valley. And I suppose I ought to stand for that!"

"So by that reasoning, you're justified in breaking the law?"

Clant Calder's mouth twisted. "What law?" he retorted. "Mister, there's the whole cause of our trouble! The Government at Austin can't seem to make up its mind. There's nothin' on the books against building fences on public land—and there isn't anything against cuttin' 'em once they're built! If they'd only get to work and clear the issue, maybe a man could pay some attention to the lawbooks! But I cain't wait for it. I've got too big an investment at stake—and that fence is going to stay where it is!"

Clant Calder lifted the gunpoint then, significantly.

"All right! Your question's answered, feller. How about answerin' mine?"

CHAPTER V

Slugging Match

JIM HATFIELD hesitated. This CCC boss had proved a surprise to him, in a number of ways. He gave the impression of being a man of high intelligence and considerable learning. However ruthless his methods, he seemed to have strong reasons which, in his own eyes at least, served to justify them. For just an instant Jim Hatfield felt an impulse to speak frankly, perhaps even to reveal that he was a Texas Ranger.

The decision, however, was taken out of his hands. For just then a rider came bursting through the trees, from the direction of the road and the ranch headquarters. It was Virgil Massey, the CCC tough foreman. Hatfield knew him the instant he saw the glint of the man's red beard, even before his brutish features came distinctly into view.

Massey recognized Hatfield, in turn, and a shout broke from him as he spurred over and dragged his bronc to a sliding halt on the sear, slick grass of the knoll. He took in the gun that Clant Calder had leveled on the stranger and he grunted heavily in approval.

"So you got him! Good!" A red-furred paw dragged out a gun and suddenly Hatfield was covered two ways. "I'll take charge of him, now, Boss!"

"You know this man?" Clant Calder asked, with only mild interest. "We've been having an interesting little talk, but I couldn't get much out of him."

"I know him, all right!" growled Massey, in his strangely blurred speech.

All at once, Jim Hatfield understood the reason for that. The CCC foreman had a harelip that disfigured his mouth and gave him trouble in talking plainly. Vanity, perhaps, had led him to disguise the blemish by concealing it with that heavy growth of red whiskers. Or, the Ranger thought with a sudden start, there might be a different reason.

"This is the hombre I told you about last night, Boss," the range boss hurried on, "the one that threw down on me and the boys and took Kid Welsh away from us, just when we'd caught the galoot red-handed! Now he's gone and blown a lock off the road gate, buffaloed Stew Lempry who was on guard and laid him out, just missin' a fractured skull, and sneaked inside the fence to do still more mischief. I been lookin' for him since I found Lempry unconscious and the gate standin' open. A good thing you caught him!"

"I guess maybe it was!" Clant Calder's shadowed eyes had gone steely hard; his mouth was knife-edged beneath the bony beak of a nose that split his gaunt face. The news Massey had brought had altered his whole manner, and Hatfield knew there now could be no thought of taking the man into his confidence. It would have been a foolish move, anyway. There was too strong a possibility that one Texas Ranger already filled an unmarked grave, somewhere on CCC range, to take any such chances.

So he held his tongue, and Clant Calder slid the gun he held back into its shoulder holster.

"Get rid of him, Virg!" he ordered curtly. "Put him off the Triple C and make it plain what'll happen if he ever comes back."

"You don't want to let him go as easy

as that?" objected Massey, his own six-gun rock-steady in his fist. "I think I ought to work him over a little—make him tell who he is and just what he's up to in these parts."

Calder looked dubious. "You think he'll talk?"

"I guarantee it!"

A wolfish gleam had come into Massey's bearded face.

"Get down off that bronc, fella!" he ordered, waggling the Colt-barrel for emphasis. "Hurry it up! Boss, you better take those guns of his."

Hatfield offered no argument. He dropped Goldy's reins, swung stiffly out of leather with Redbeard's gunpoint following him. Clant Calder, scowling, moved forward and lifted the long-barreled Frontier Colts out of the prisoner's holsters, and dropped them at the base of a tree whose leafless branches arched overhead.

"All right!" said Virg Massey, and dismounted.

HE SHOVED his gun into leather, pushed back his hat with a broad thumb. Spread-legged, he faced Hatfield, a grin of pleasure on his disfigured mouth.

He was as tall as the Ranger, and pounds heavier—solid meat and muscle that made Hatfield shape up as almost slightly built by comparison. Virg Massey measured himself against Hatfield, and believed the advantage was all on his own side. Deliberately he doubled his hands into huge, maul-like fists.

"You made a fool of me, last night," he said. "Now, mister, you're gonna get all that foolishness knocked out of you!"

And he lunged forward, mighty arms swinging.

The very size of the CCC foreman could be enough to put terror into an opponent, but Jim Hatfield stood and watched him come, lean face impassive. Then, at the last moment, he made a quick sidestep, and when Massey's clubbing fists reached for him he wasn't there.

The momentum of his own rush sent the big man past him a step before he could catch himself and pivot on one thick boot sole. As he did, a fist seemed to come from nowhere and take Massey on the side of his whiskered jaw.

The wallop jarred him, wrenched his head around on the corded, pillarlike neck, and tore a grunt of pain from his lips. But Massey recovered from that momentary surprise, pivoted, and came boring in at his opponent. Jim Hatfield couldn't clear the swing of that huge right fist this time. It landed against the point of his shoulder with bruising force, and the arm went numb clear to the elbow.

Hatfield gave back a step but his own right fist lashed out as he moved. Once more it landed against Massey's face, and it stung.

Fury swelled the bully foreman's massive chest, contorted his bearded features. Plainly, this was not going to be the easy victory he had expected, the pleasurable punishing of an enemy who could give back little in return. This stranger, for all his seeming lightness of build, was no pushover. There was deceptive, but real, power in the solid set of his hard-muscled shoulders, and quickness in his arms and in the lithe agility of tapering hips.

But the surprise of this discovery did not slow Virg Massey. He liked a rough-and-tumble, had too much confidence in his own brute strength to fear an even match. And revenge for the way this stranger had forced him to back down in front of his own men at the hangtree last night was a need that drove him bellowing at Hatfield.

This time, the Ranger didn't yield ground. He stood and met the charge, and the thud of fists against flesh, the pant of straining bodies and slither of boot soles on the slick, dead grass sounded beneath the bare-branched walnut trees.

Clant Calder, at one side, watched with heavy brows drawn down above his piercing blue stare.

Hatfield blocked a body blow with a quickly lifted forearm, drove his own right, hard, into Massey's thick middle. It was like punching plated rubber; his fist bounced right off and only the grunt of the man's breath told that he had felt the blow. Then a wallop to the ribs sent the air whooshing from Hatfield's lips, and drove him back a little.

He stabbed at Massey's face, felt the bite of pain as his knuckle struck a tooth. Blood spurted from the man's smashed lip. He shook his head at the sting, bored in. The Ranger had to give ground, but even as he did he kept up a tearing,

slashing attack at Massey's face, which seemed the man's most vulnerable point. A hard jab closed the foreman's left eye for him and brought a bellow of pain from his bleeding mouth.

Next instant, Hatfield's boot twisted in a slick place in the grass and he started down, thrown completely off-balance.

He stabbed a hand against the earth and caught himself before he could land prone, but he was on one knee, turned sideward to his enemy, and before he could move Massey's big boot struck him. The toe of the cowhide smashed hard against his back, just over the kidney. Blinding pain poured through Hatfield's lower body.

THE force of the kick knocked him flat. He rolled over to his back, and there was Massey's big shape above him, against the bright morning sky and the lacy pattern of dark, bare tree heads. Virg Massey had overstepped his prone body and now he was coming back again, a snarl of triumph pulling at his bloody face. That same boot that had flattened his opponent was lifting, prepared for the conqueror's immemorial rite of stamping in a fallen enemy's skull.

Hatfield, still sick with the punishment of that kick, nevertheless forced himself to move. He lifted his arms to protect his head, caught at the boot as it descended. It struck, the vicious prong of the spur ripping the flesh across the back of one hand. Hatfield grabbed at the leg and shoved sideward.

Massey lost balance. He spilled across his enemy in a heavy sprawl. And, fast as he was in scrambling free, Hatfield moved faster. He was the first to reach his feet. As Massey, a little dazed from his fall, stumbled upright, the Ranger stepped forward and put all his weight behind a blow aimed at the foreman's unprotected jaw. It splatted meatily, and Massey dropped.

Panting, on braced legs, Hatfield stood over him and mopped the sweat from his face onto a sleeve as he waited.

Massey was a little slower this time in pulling himself up onto his knees and then to his feet. And as soon as he was up Hatfield was ready again, and flattened him a second time.

Redbeard stayed there, stunned but conscious, and stared up at the man who had beaten him.

One eye was shut, and blood dribbled out of his harelipped mouth and into the matted beard. His lips moved, forming incoherent bubbling noises as the bully foreman sobbed for wind.

Jim Hatfield straightened, running the fingers of one hand through sweaty hair. His hat lay at his feet and he leaned down and got it, moving stiffly because of the dull, throbbing ache that Massey's kick had left in his back. Then, dragging on the Stetson, he turned and looked at Clant Calder.

The Triple C boss hadn't moved from where he stood. He had watched the fight through to a finish with almost no change of expression on his sallow, beak-nosed face. Now his piercing eyes met Hatfield's.

What he said was, "A lot of people, including Virg Massey, thought the man didn't live who could whip him. Like any other myth, it was interesting to see it disproved." He didn't seem particularly angry over the beating-up of his foreman, but Hatfield had already decided this was one man whose feelings would never be easy to read.

"He bothers me again, I might have to kill him," the Ranger said pointedly.

Without another word, he walked over to the tree where Calder had deposited his captured six-guns, picked them up, shoved them into holsters. He turned back and favored the CCC owner with a level stare.

"Our talk was just getting interesting," he said, "when this sidewinder broke in on it. Maybe sometime I'll drop around and we can go into all this again; but I don't think there'd be much gained by trying to talk seriously with that lying there." With a jerk of his head he indicated the beaten foreman.

"Just who are you, feller?" Clant Calder said then, on new note. "Why are you mixin' in the affairs of this valley? You've got me curious."

"I don't see that it matters. Why not put me down for a nosy stranger who don't like to see good range ruined by six-gun war?"

"In that case," said Calder, bleakly, "you'll do well to stick your nose somewheres else or you're apt to get it shot

off! The middle of this war might turn out just a little too hot a place for you. What's more, you better not get any notions of stopping it, all by yourself, no matter how many of my men you knock out with your gun, and your fists!"

CHAPTER VI

War Against a Neutral

HATFIELD knew he had accomplished all he could here—which was exactly nothing. He heeled about and walked across the brown grass to where Goldy stood waiting on trailing reins, found the stirrup and swung up. Calder apparently intended making no move to stop him from riding away.

Virgil Massey had pushed himself groggily to a sitting position and was ringering his bearded jaw, eyes glazed, and not completely aware of his surroundings. Looking at him, something was at work in the back of Hatfield's mind, nagging at him. He suddenly decided this matter of Massey would bear investigating.

Pulling the sorrel about, he nodded briefly at the CCC owner.

"Don't be too sure," he said, "that we won't be meeting again, Calder!"

Then Goldy lifted into a lope and they went down off the knoll, with its crown of barren trees, heading south again toward the wire. Clant Calder merely stood and watched Hatfield go, that same unreadable frown weighting down his lean, strong features.

Hatfield rode off CCC graze without further argument about his presence. The gate was shut but the gun-smashed lock had not yet been replaced. He leaned from saddle, pushed the panel wide enough for Goldy to get through, and closed it after him.

So far, he had visited both camps in the rival factions of this barbed-wire war, and had received a poor reception in both places. His body held the marks of that terrific encounter with the CCC foreman, both in the sullen ache of his booted side, and in a half-dozen bruises where Massey's mauling fists had slammed him. The skin was broken over one cheek-bone and a trickle of blood had clotted there. He dabbed at it with his neck cloth, gingerly.

The one thing he had succeeded in doing was to make himself conspicuous. His next move would have to be chosen with care. He couldn't long maintain his pose of a drifter, without interest in this range war. On the other hand, he was not yet ready to reveal his identity, and take a side. The thing was too confused for that.

He came back to the redbearded Virg Massey, and the question which Massey had started to working in the back of his mind. Well, there was one way to check on this hunch and it would be a good thing to know for certain. Hatfield squinted at the sun, which put a bleak light across the range but held as yet, at this early season, but little warmth.

Close to noon before he could reach the valley town, he thought, and send a telegram. He spoke to Goldy and sent him in that direction at a mile-consuming lope, following the contours of the wagon road.

It paralleled the fence for some distance, and on the other side Hatfield saw an occasional fence-rider patrolling the wire. It must take a large crew to keep the fence this well guarded. The men rode regular posts, back and forth along the barrier. The sun pointed up the brass of filled cartridge belts, glinted on carbines in saddle scabbards. No breech in the wire would long escape their notice, and if any of the free grass men were caught cutting it, a gun-shot signal would quickly bring the fury of the Triple C against them.

The thoroughness of this defense, alone, would have told an observer of the seriousness of the trouble in the valley.

After a time the hoof-pocked wagon ruts angled away from the fence and pointed into rougher country, toward the town which stood at the valley's head. It climbed a shallow spine of ridge, presently, from which Jim Hatfield got a pretty broad view of the bunchgrass flats, with the lean herds grazing it and, occasionally, the huddle of drab, unpainted buildings marking one of the small ranch headquarters.

Where a lesser trail branched off into the scrub cedars, a sign post bore the D

Cross brand, and the name of its owner: Tom Dakins. Hatfield remembered this name. On impulse he turned into the track and followed it, thinking it might be worth while to look up the man who, according to what Kid Welsh had told him, was still one of the few neutrals in the grass war, still holding out for peaceful settlement. He could be a valuable ally.

SHORTLY the ranch showed ahead of him—a two-room house, not recently painted but with a look of neatness about it; a barn and corral. There was the remnant of a haystack, with a fence to keep cattle out of the stackyard. There was also a well drill, set up over an uncompleted hole, but not now in operation. All this Hatfield took in with the same glance which noticed that Tom Dakins already had visitors.

He pulled rein quickly, narrowing down on the four riders who were grouped in front of the little house. Three were in saddle, the fourth had dismounted to confront a slight, bare-headed man whom Hatfield judged to be Tom Dakins.

There seemed to be an argument afoot. Voices, lifted in anger, carried to him thinly. Dakins was shaking his head, apparently denying something that the leader of the quartet of riders had just asserted.

About that leader was something that struck the Ranger as familiar.

Hatfield had not been noticed. He stepped down from saddle, and with the same motion slid the carbine from his saddle-boot. Carrying the rifle, he left Goldy in the cover of a blackjack clump and moved forward to a brushy draw that opened a few feet away, angling to within a hundred yards or so of the dooryard. Lightly he dropped into this and went at a quick, crouching run behind the screening mesquite bushes.

Suddenly he knew the leader of the riders. He was the CCC man, Link. All four horses bore Calder's brand.

He saw now there was still another person, one he had missed before—a woman, in the shadowed doorway behind Dakins. Hatfield saw her skirts, and the graying hair that made a cloud about her head. She stood with hands clasped tight, staring at her husband's visitors in fright and dread.

Suddenly, above the angry tumble of voices, Tom Dakins raised a cry that carried sharply in the stillness:

"I wasn't there, I tell you! I had nothing to do with it. You know I've taken no part in any of this trouble!"

"You was seen!" Link roared back at him. "And I got my orders!"

His arm came up. A gun-barrel flashed sunlight, and Tom Dakins choked out a cry of fear. Weaponless, he could only drop back a pace, hands lifting in a helpless gesture.

Then the woman came hurtling from the doorway, throwing herself at Link, trying to grab his arm and wrest the gun away from him. The CCC man cursed and struck at her, a back-handed blow. It landed heavily against the side of her head. The woman fell away from him, stumbled and went down. With a bellow of fury, Tom Dakins surged forward.

Backing a step, Link whipped the Colt muzzle into line.

"Askin' for it, huh?" he snarled. "I'll drill yuh both, by—"

Jim Hatfield had his rifle at shoulder. On the flat report of his shot, the hat lifted neatly from Link's head and was sent skimming and bouncing in the air, to a chorus of scared yells that broke from the Triple C riders.

The grouped horses split apart as nervous hands jerked at the reins. Link had ducked convulsively as the bullet whined close overhead and jumped the shapeless Stetson from his head. Now he recovered and, with a roar, whirled to see where it had come from.

Hatfield levered, and shot again. Dust geysered as he plumped his bullet into the ground at the CCC man's feet. The man leaped backward, trigger finger crimping a hasty bullet from the six-gun in his hand, far wide of the spot where Jim Hatfield was crouched now behind the brush screen at the edge of the draw. Calmly the Ranger ejected the second empty, pumped a new shell into the chamber of his saddle gun.

MEANWHILE the rancher, Tom Dakins, had not failed to make use of this break. Recovering from his first astonishment, he had whirled to where his wife lay huddled in the dirt, put there

by Link's hard blow, and was lifting her to her feet, hurrying her toward the safety of the shack doorway.

The CCC riders had completely forgotten the old couple. Trying to quiet their restive horses, they had all shipped hand guns by now and bullets raked the bushes that gave Hatfield cover.

But it was a long range for accurate six-gun work, and he stood his ground. He lined up his sights on one of the crew. As the stock of the rifle kicked against his shoulder the man shrieked in pain and sagged forward over saddle-horn, grabbing for a smashed gun arm.

At the same instant, Tom Dakins reappeared in the shack doorway, a rifle in his hands. Dakins' voice, shrill and trembling with his rage, shouted:

"All right, you buzzards! Now maybe the odds are a little different!"

It was true enough. He and the rifleman in the draw had the CCC gunmen caught between them in a crossfire, exposed there in the open space before the shack. The quick reversal put them at once into an impossible situation and Hatfield, seeing this, held off trigger a moment, thinking they would not dare to continue the fight.

But Link had nerve and blind persistence. With a snarl of rage he whipped his six-gun over and tried a snapshot at the man in the doorway. A fraction after the shot, Dakins got off his own .30-30 slug. Link had fired too hastily for accuracy, but Dakins didn't miss. As the two weapons mingled their flame and sound, the CCC man twisted and went down, crumpled by the shock of a heavy shell at close range.

That ended the shooting. The two CCC men still able to fight were convinced now of the suicidal result of keeping on. One of them flung up a hand, yelped:

"Don't kill us! We quit! We was only following orders!"

"Orders, huh!" snorted Tom Dakins. "Orders to beat up helpless old people that never done you any harm? Well, here's a new one for you! Throw down your guns, and ride out of here!"

Quickly, a couple of six-shooters dropped into the dirt.

"Give us a chance to put Link across his saddle and take him away with us," one of the Calder men whined. "He's gonna bleed to death!"

"Sure! Take him and welcome. I don't want him cluttering up my dooryard. Go see if the doctor can do anything for him, and for this other gent's busted wing. Then run and take a message to your boss for me! Tell Calder and Massey I've learned my lesson. I know now that what young Welsh and the others have tried to tell me all along was true! Nobody can win by trying to keep peace with Triple C. I wouldn't join with them when you took the river graze we'd been using for years. I spent what money I had managed to save to rent a drilling machine and haul in winter feed enough to keep my stock going. Today, I see I wasted my time —me, and the three-four others who held out for peace. And today, I quit!"

He waggled his rifle barrel.

"Go on and tell 'em that! And let 'em do to me what they will. Because from now on, I'm fightin' back!"

CHAPTER VII

Smokepole Setup

NO ONE made answer. The CCC riders looked at each other, and then they got down stiffly and went to where Link was sprawled moaning in the dust with a red pool of blood forming under him. They lifted him, got him to his horse and jackknifed across the saddle.

The man whose arm Hatfield had smashed still had strength to cling to his mount's back. The group, with their wounded, rode away, like that, trailing Link's bronc. A ground breeze took away the spurting dust of ironshod hoofs, and silence came back upon the little ranch.

Tom Dakins lifted his voice, then, to call to his unseen champion in the brush.

"Whoever you may be, I want to thank you for sidin' me. It looked for sure there as if—"

He broke off, turning quickly. His wife had called from within the shack, and her feeble summons took the rancher inside with his words unfinished.

Hatfield climbed out of the draw and went forward, rifle at trail. Before entering the shack he halted to lay a long

stare after the departing CCC men. He saw little danger that they would return. So into the doorway he went, to look upon a neat but poorly furnished interior.

Dakins' wife sat in a chair by the center table, her body limp, her head leaning back. Her husband, with an anxious look, was bending over her.

"Is your wife hurt?" Hatfield asked.

"No," said the rancher, glancing up. "Just a little overcome by everything." He added, quickly, "How about you, mister? They get you bad?"

"Me? I wasn't even touched."

"There's blood on your cheek."

Jim Hatfield touched the place. "That's something I got earlier," he said. "A little slugging match with a man named Virg Massey."

Tom Dakins turned, at that, to face the Ranger squarely. The Ranger could see now that Dakins was no longer young, a man fined down by the years of toil and struggle to make his sagebrush ranch pay, and with added lines put into his thin, sensitive features by the trying events of these last terrible months. Looking narrowly at his visitor now, he said:

"For a gent I never seen before on this range, you've sure jumped into the thick of things, in a hurry! First, battling it out with Massey, and now—this! I kind of think I owe you my life, mister. Except for you buying in, those Triple C skunks would have had my hide—and I reckon they wouldn't have been past doin' the same to Martha if she'd interfered!"

He turned back to his wife, in earnest solicitude. Both of these people were badly shaken by the near tragedy that had hung over their heads.

Jim Hatfield saw a dipper and pail on the sink across the room and walked over, brought back a dipper of water and handed it to Dakins, who accepted it with a nod of thanks. He held it to his wife's lips and she took a swallow or two. She seemed to be recovering from the shock of the encounter.

"I think you'd ought to lie down for a little bit, honey," Tom Dakins said, and helped her to her feet. He added to Hatfield, "I'll be back in just a second."

Leaning on him heavily, Martha Dakins let her husband help her into the other room of the cabin. When he returned in a moment, Hatfield was holding the dipper, looking at the water in it.

"You haul this stuff pretty far, too?" Hatfield asked.

"Far enough!" said Dakins. "It's one of the most expensive luxuries in this country, now that we ain't allowed to reach the Sundust."

"What about that well outside? You haven't struck anything yet?"

Dakins shook his head. "It ain't much of a rig, for one thing. Drill steel melts down like butter, trying to get through the hardrock shelf that lies just under the soil here. I'm about ready to give up."

"Don't," Hatfield said. "The water table should be fairly close to the surface, if you can once break through that shield. You ought to strike a good flow."

"And supposing I should?" Dakins commented bitterly. "I thought once that would end trouble between me and Calder's outfit, but I see now that there ain't to be but one end! This is a fight to the finish, and every man's place is at the side of Kid Welsh!"

JIM HATFIELD frowned. He could understand, of course, how the man felt. But he saw, too, that if he lost the neutrality of Dakins and of the few others who had stayed aloof this far, his problem would become just that much more difficult.

"Listen here," he said suddenly, "I happen to know for a fact that Calder's men actually believed you were there last night, during that skirmish with Welsh and his gang. Of course, that doesn't justify what they did here, but maybe it explains it."

"Yeah?" Dakins was looking at him narrowly. "And just what has this got to do with you? What are you after?"

"Nothing. Except I don't like to see a man rush into a wrong decision. . . ."

Tom Dakins was standing in the doorway, frowning after his visitor as Hatfield picked up Goldy where the sorrel had been left in the blackjack clump. Mounting, he headed away from the ranch. The Ranger had said as much as he thought he dared, and he couldn't tell whether it had had any effect toward holding the rancher to a continued neutrality. He rather doubted it.

It seemed plain that CCC was pushing hard—harder than ever—and little con-

cerned to keep the few friends it still had. Apparently, Massey and Calder were convinced their strength was unbeatable, against any combination of their smaller neighbors.

A bit past noon, the cowtown of Sundust loomed ahead, near the rim at the head of the valley. Even from a distance, Hatfield could see that there was only a single street, extending for a couple of crooked blocks and lined with drab, windscoured buildings. The largest was a two-storied combination saloon and hotel he saw as he drew nearer. There was a railroad freight station, serving a spur of one of the Texas trunk lines, and there Hatfield rode first to see about sending a telegram to Captain William McDowell, at Ranger headquarters in Austin.

He waited until his message had been put on the wire, and left the station hoping the telegrapher knew how to keep his mouth shut. Remounting Goldy, he rode back along the street. Then he hunted a place to eat. There were a lot of things he wanted to think over, and he also had to give his wire time to reach McDowell and draw an answer.

He located an eat shack across from the big, boxlike hotel. Leaving Goldy at a public stable with a bait of oats thrown into a manger for him, Hatfield walked back and entered the place. The proprietor was a beefy gent with a not-too-clean apron tied around his thick waist. As Hatfield came in, he was standing behind the counter, arms folded and with a sour look on his face as he listened to a ragged range tramp's plea for a handout.

"Get out of here, Jennings!" he said loudly, as Hatfield appeared in the doorway. "You've had your last free meal on me, savvy? Now lemme alone so I can tend to the paying customers...Go on, Hap! Beat it!"

He turned to his arriving customer, his hard manner altering as he greeted Hatfield and waited for his order. The Ranger hitched himself onto one of the high stools at the counter and, answering, looked curiously at the range tramp he had heard called Jennings. The man was scowling at him from red-rimmed, bloodshot eyes.

The fellow might have been a cowpuncher, at one time or another. He wore the wreckage of range garb, his hands were rope-burned, and his legs bowed to the shape of the saddle. But obviously he hadn't been sober enough to work at anything for some spell. The reek of whisky was on him, and his face, bearded, and lined beyond its years, showed the marks of his heavy drinking. It showed something else, too. Something lost, and yet insistent, in the man's piercing stare.

BUT he finally turned away and shuffled out of the eat shack in his cracked, rundown boots. As the door rattled shut behind him the proprietor gave a grunt of disgust.

"How can a man let himself go like that? In only a couple months, too?" He shrugged, dismissing the subject, to get to work serving his customer.

Jim Hatfield, himself, had too many other things on his mind to give much thought to that range tramp's problem, either.

He had finished eating and was building a smoke when the sound of a cavalcade of horsemen drifted in from the street. The eat shack proprietor prowled forward to the fly-blown window and, standing there with thick fists planted on his hips, muttered sourly as he stared out into the street.

"Triple C—looks like a young army! Clant Calder don't even dare come into town any more without bringing half his crew with him for a bodyguard!"

Quickly Hatfield slid off the stool and joined the man at the window.

A dozen strong, the CCC came at a canter along the deserted thoroughfare, raising a billow of dust and spattering the echoes of drumming hoofs against the tall false-fronts. Calder rode in the van, with Virg Massey at his elbow. The others strung out behind. The red-bearded foreman showed the marks of his fight with Hatfield.

At the tail of the procession, a ranch wagon came rolling into view with two men on the seat, one driving, the other hunched over as though in pain, his right arm snugged against his chest in a makeshrift cloth sling. There was another man in the back of the wagon, lying flat and motionless in a wrapping of blanket. The two wounded men, Hatfield decided quickly, must be Link and the other rider who had stopped bullets at the Dakins place.

"Fresh meat for the sawbones!" observed the eat shack owner. "A busy gent, these days!" He shook his head and commented, "More reason than this, though, to bring Calder and his boys into town today! A shipment of bob wire is due at the freight warehouse, I hear, coming on the night train. They say Calder ordered it, to double the strength of his fence and change it from two-strand to four. The freight agent is scared the free grass men might try burning down the station or something, so he sent word for Calder to be here and take the stuff off his hands, pronto. I reckon that's why he brought a guard with him."

Hatfield said nothing but he frowned, considering this news. If Kid Welsh and his friends had heard of the wire shipment, and took it into their heads to try and capture or destroy it, this thing could easily come to a quick, bloody windup before the day was finished.

The main bunch of CCC's riders had racked their mounts at hitch rails fronting the big hotel-saloon and were trooping noisily inside, for drinks to cut the dust in their throats. A couple of them escorted the wagon on up the street, heading for the doctor's place. Clant Calder, Virgil Massey and another man remained on the warped plank walk near the horses, discussing some matter or other.

Jim Hatfield was not unaware that to show his own face in this town now could be a risky business. The Triple C had taken over for the time being and he certainly had no friends in that outfit! But he was not going to let this scare him into hiding.

However, as he stepped out of the lunchroom into the sunlight, none of the three men on the opposite side of the street as much as glanced in his direction. They were looking across the street, but not at him. Their attention seemed riveted by something half a block farther on. Wondering what it was that held their interest, Hatfield followed the direction of their stares.

UNDER the shadow of an arcade in front of a gun repair shop, young Welsh stood alone. He had come out of the shop, and he had a six-gun in his hands. Apparently it was one he had left there to be fixed, at some time or other, and had just got back; for he was studying the working of the mechanism, carefully. Then, as though satisfied, he thumbed shells from his belt, shoved them into the chamber and snapped the cylinder home. It was only then that he looked up—and discovered the trio eyeing him across the street.

He stood as he was, the fresh-loaded gun in his hand. In that moment Jim Hatfield knew that anything might happen.

The leader of the CCC was on hand, and young Welsh was all alone. If they wanted to wipe out the Kid, right now, they could do it. The Kid's pony stood at a tie-rack a few yards away, but the young rancher might easily prefer to go down facing Calder and Massey, rather than take refuge in flight.

Here was the pair he hated, and maybe he might take them both before a bullet smashed him down. Hatfield could almost read these thoughts in the slim youngster's taut stance, in the way the Kid's body went slowly into a fighter's crouch.

He saw all this. Then, turning, he started pacing toward that scene, boot heels tapping echoes from the sidewalk planking.

He had taken maybe a half dozen strides when a voice nearby whispered, sibilantly:

"You've chosen your side, then, have you—*Ranger?*"

CHAPTER VIII

Wagon Train

IT WAS a start of surprise that made Jim Hatfield turn quickly. In astonishment he looked into the bloodshot eyes, the whiskered face of the range tramp he had heard the lunchroom proprietor call Hap Jennings. The man was leaning in a doorway and as Hatfield swung toward him he shook his head wildly and tried to draw back deeper into the shadow.

"Don't look at me!" he whispered, in sudden fright. "I don't want anybody to see us talkin'." Something in his urgency made Hatfield obey. He paced forward again, casually, disinterestedly, but his

ears were tuned to the low voice in the doorway.

"Scared you, didn't I?" he heard Jennings saying. "I knew you was a Ranger. I been waiting for one to show up, ever since the other one dropped out of sight; and you got the look about you. I noticed you yesterday when you come through town. When you showed up again today, I was sure of it. I knew you must be hanging around for good reason."

"All right!" muttered Hatfield. "What is it you want?"

"Something to tell you," the whispering voice said, "but I don't dare, here. Meet me in an hour, will you—where the west trail cuts across that dry arroyo a mile out of town? By the plum thicket. I got information that you need to know!"

For a moment Hatfield hesitated. The aroma of whisky floated out from this man, but the voice was not that of a drunk. Down-and-outer though Jennings was, he gave the Ranger a strange impression of deadly earnestness. Something told him he shouldn't reject this offer.

"I'll be there," he answered, from the corner of his mouth. "In an hour. But this better not be a joke!"

The interruption had drawn his attention momentarily from the tense drama of that other scene, farther along the dusty street. Now, as he returned to it, he saw that more of the CCC riders had joined the group in front of the hotel, spreading out to face the lone figure of the defiant young cowboy across from them. And now Welsh was going into motion.

Six-gun in hand, the Kid had stepped out to the hitch-rail where his pony, a stockinged bay, stood with reins dropped across the chewed pole. He took the reins, and as he lifted them Hatfield saw Virg Massey, on the other side of the dust strip, slide his own gun from holster.

Massey did not mean to let the Kid leave this town alive! If Welsh threw himself into saddle and tried to beat a retreat, it would likely be the signal for a hail of lead to sweep him out of the saddle.

Jim Hatfield slid one of his matched Colts into a lean palm and waited, wondering just what Welsh would do. The Kid seemed to know his peril. He stood for a minute with the reins in his fingers, and tension built up in the chill of the silent town. Then, instead of mounting, he suddenly turned and began walking slowly along the edge of the street, leading the pony, its head bobbing at the end of the leathers.

Massey lowered his gun, and even from this distance Hatfield could read the man's puzzled uncertainty. No one moved. The scuff of the Kid's boots and the *clip-clop* of his pony's mincing steps were the only sounds. He was coming in Hatfield's direction, but the Ranger didn't think the Kid had noticed him yet.

Suddenly, without warning, young Welsh turned aside and led his horse up the slanted ramp and into the dark entrance of the big public livery, and disappeared from view. The Ranger saw his strategy, the instant before it dawned on the CCC crowd across the way. He heard the bawl of rage that burst from the red-bearded foreman:

"Hey! We let him walk away from us! He means to fort up inside there and hold us off!"

But by this time Jim Hatfield was in action.

HE STEPPED aside quickly between two buildings, and started sprinting lightly back toward the alley paralleling the main street behind the row of houses. Less than two minutes from the time young Welsh entered the wide front doors of the livery, Hatfield was slipping through the rear entrance into the musty, shadowed building.

He went forward along the straw-littered aisle, past the rows of stalls in one of which Goldy was feeding. When he could make out the dark silhouette of the youngster and his pony, against the open doorway, he halted and let his sharp whisper echo through the booming silence:

"Kid! Kid Welsh!"

The young man whirled, six-gun glinting as he dragged it up, searching for a target.

"Don't shoot, feller." Hatfield said. "It's Haycroft! I want to help you!"

"Haycroft!" the gun was lowered. Hatfield stepped forward into the dim light.

Up close, he could see now the sweaty sheen on young Welsh's lean face, the desperate glint in his wide, scared eyes.

Yes, Kid Welsh was scared—but he was game.

"They can't get me—not in here," he said tightly. "I'll pick 'em off before they get close enough!"

"It would be suicide, bucking that whole crowd," Hatfield said quickly. "They might do anything, even to setting the stable afire and driving you out. I'm not sure Clant Calder would order such a thing himself, but I've learned fast enough that when Massey's got the bit in his teeth there's no holding him back."

Welsh looked at him narrowly. "Why take up for Calder? He's the boss of the outfit!" He shook his head. "You clear out, Haycroft. I can handle my own fight."

"You're coming with me!" Hatfield said grimly. "Out the back. There's time, before they have the place surrounded. But we've got to hurry."

"No! I'm not chicken enough to run from a tight!"

"Use your head, Kid! What good will it do for you to throw yourself away? There's nothing cowardly about saving your neck when the odds are such you can't win. Wiser to live, and fight another day."

At that instant someone in the street must have thought he saw movement, because a shot rang out, a bullet whipped through the big door and knocked dust from a ceiling joist. A flurry of other shots followed it.

"Well," said Hatfield, "if *you* want to be a fool—"

He shrugged, and turned back to the stall where Goldy waited. In quick time he had the saddle on and cinched in place, the bridle slipped over the sorrel's head. He led Goldy into the aisle, and found Welsh beside him, holding his own pony's rein.

"All right," said the youngster. "I guess you talk sense, at that. Thing for me to do is get back to my friends and pass on what I learned from the gunsmith, just now."

"And what was that?" Hatfield demanded, but got no answer.

He could guess, though. The gunsmith, being a friend of the Kid's, must have told him about the shipment of wire at the freight depot. And Welsh would see that as a possibility to strike at Triple C.

Hatfield let the matter go, and led the way toward the sliding rear door of the stable. A shove of the shoulder pushed it wide enough to allow a horse and rider to slip through. From the street there still came the excited shouting of the CCC crew, but the rear of the barn was clear. And beyond stretched the open, rolling range. The two men swung to leather and struck out.

Keeping the barn between them and the street, they headed for a brushy draw a few hundred feet distant. Just before they dropped into it, Hatfield looked back and still saw no sign that their escape had been discovered. He breathed easier, and dropped his six-gun into holster.

"We're clear, Kid!" he said. The screen of brush closed at their backs, shutting off sight of the town. "But we'd better cover distance just to make sure."

WELSH had nothing to say. They rode in silence, putting the town and the CCC guns behind them. Presently, the Kid reined in, pulling around

[*Turn page*]

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to face Jim Hatfield.

"So you're staying on the Sundust!" he said heavily. "And getting mixed deeper into this thing all the time . . . I don't figure you, Haycroft! Are you on our side, or not?"

"I'm not on anybody's side, Kid," Hatfield said. "Not yet, anyway. I've tangled with Virg Massey a time or two, but on the other hand I don't think much of some of your own friends. Tug Downing, and those others—they looked like a bunch of long loop artists to me!"

"I told you to lay off Downing," complained the Kid. "I know all about what he is, but he happens to be fighting the same outfit I am, and I'm not in any spot to be particular who helps me."

"But what's he after?" the Ranger persisted. "You're not paying gun-wages, like Clant Calder does. What's Downing getting out of this fight?"

"I said lay off!"

Kid Welsh turned a harsh stare on the Ranger. His hand tightened and Hatfield saw that it rested on the handle of the belt knife the Kid wore. He seemed to reach for it instinctively whenever he was angry.

Hatfield realized then that he had prodded too hard. "All right," he said, with a shrug, and to change the subject: "What can you tell me about Hap Jennings, that range tramp who cadges drinks around town?"

There was a question in the cowboy's sharp, suspicious glance. "What would you want to know about him for?" he demanded.

"Oh, just curious. He looks like he'd been a cowpuncher. What's his trouble? Can't he hold down a job?"

"I wouldn't know," said the Kid, relaxing into surly indifference. "He was riding for Triple C up to a month or two ago. I got no idea what busted him up the way he is. I got too many worries of my own to—"

His head lifted suddenly, his stare shifting beyond Jim Hatfield to some point in the distance, and broke off with the thought unfinished. A look of incredulity had spread across his sunbrowned face.

"Now, what in the name of—"

Hatfield twisted in saddle for a look. Out of a defile in the shallow wall at the head of the Sundust, some three miles distant, a line of white-topped wagons was filing into view, moving down in a slow, serpentine crawl onto the bunchgrass valley flats.

Jim Hatfield had almost forgotten that outfit, in the rush of events since his own arrival here. They were the homeseekers, the train of emigrants he had passed on the trail the day before. What new complication would their coming add to the bloody confusion of this contested range?

Kid Welsh uttered a tight oath.

"Whoever they are," he gritted, "this valley has got no room for them, or grass to spare for their stock. And if they think—"

He clapped steel to his pony suddenly, and spurted forward. Jim Hatfield sent Goldy after him, falling in beside the Kid as the tawny earth slid back under running hoofs.

The distance narrowed quickly. The wagons seemed to grow larger as the two galloped on. They could see the drab canvas coverings, sagging on the bows, the ribby look of the horses, the shapes of the people who rode the high, swaying seats.

Nearly every rig had a plow roped to the side of it and Hatfield heard the Welsh kid's sharp intake of breath, seeing that.

"Nesters!" His face showed an intolerant anger as he mouthed the word. "Nesters—on the Sundust! For their own good, they better not be aimin' to stay!"

Then they had reached the train and were hauling rein beside the lead wagon. The man on the seat lifted his hand in a slow, friendly greeting which Welsh chose to ignore. Jim Hatfield started to say something, but the Kid broke in with an abrupt, harsh challenge:

"You the boss of this outfit, mister?"

CHAPTER IX

Warned Off!

ED ALVERSON was the name of the leader of the wagon train, Hatfield remembered from their meeting the day

before. He was a solid, big-boned man, square-jawed and level of eye. His honest, farmer's face showed a certain poise and tolerant assurance, as he looked at Welsh and took his time about replying to the youngster's abrupt question.

"No," he said finally, "I'm not the boss of anything. This is a company of free and independent citizens. It does happen, though, I've been chosen captain—if that's what you mean."

The young man colored a little under the older one's calm scrutiny. "It comes to the same thing, and you know it!" he snapped. "I'm asking what you people think you're doing, here on the Sundust."

The entire train had halted, and now men from the other wagons were down and hurrying forward to learn what was going on—men in bib overalls and heavy farmer shoes, who looked with suspicion on the two riders.

The canvas behind Alverson was pulled apart and blue eyes under a mop of wind-tossed, corn-yellow hair looked out, the eyes of a girl younger than the Kid, by a year or two. The homespun dress she wore did not disguise the firm, graceful beauty of her youthful body. In her strong arms she held a sleeping child, a young sister, plainly, judging by the strong family resemblance.

"What is it, Pop?" she demanded. She recognized Jim Hatfield then, but there was a question in her eyes as she looked at the strange rider with him.

"It's all right, Sally," her father told her. "At least, I hope so. We don't any of us want trouble," he went on, answering young Welsh. "We want homes for ourselves and our families. There's school lands in this valley that are open to purchase and settlement. We've saved our money, and we mean to buy."

The Kid had been staring wide-eyed at the girl. He tore his gaze away from her in some confusion, and turned back to her father.

"If you don't want trouble," he said, "you picked the last place you should of come. And the quicker you get out, the better!"

"Are you threatening us?" cried Sally Alverson, her voice clear and her eyes flashing with anger. "Pa, best keep an eye on that knife he's got!"

Welsh had been fingering the pouched knife handle, in that unconscious mannerism he had. He colored and dropped his hand away from it, but lost none of his own anger. His voice was even louder as he answered:

"Maybe threats are all you'll listen to! Surely you folks must have heard about the war you were riding into, but seems like even that couldn't stop you."

The man on the wagon seat nodded slowly. "We heard. But we ain't cowards, son. We need land, and this Sundust country sounds like the best there is to be had." He tapped his coat pocket. "We got a map here of the school sections that are for sale. We know our legal rights, and we'll stand by them!"

"Your legal rights won't stand you for a plugged peso!" retorted the Kid savagely. "Things are bad enough now. There's certainly no place in this squabble for a bunch of dirt farmers to try to move in and take the valley out from under our noses. And you better not think for a minute there is!"

Hatfield spoke up then, his voice quiet after the Kid's angry shouting.

"I think you better get ahold of yourself, Welsh," he said. "This kind of talk isn't doing any good."

"No?" Welsh gave him a defiant look. "You can just stay out of this, yourself, Haycroft—or whatever your name really is! You've done me a couple of good turns, but if you start interfering now I might forget that!" He turned back to the farmers, and to their leader. "Well, what about it? You going to be sensible?"

A taut and angry silence followed his challenge. The men in the dust exchanged meaningful looks, then swung their glances toward their leader.

NONE of them were armed, but it didn't look as though they would let that stop them from backing Alverson's decision, whatever it might be. Hatfield had little doubt that there would be weapons of some description in all the wagons, for these people were not fools. They would have understood the risks they were taking before ever they turned their outfits toward the Sundust.

Ed Alverson shifted position slightly on the wagon seat, and flipped the end of the reins against one hard palm.

"Sorry you feel that way about it," he

said to young Welsh. "But we're not turning back! We've come too far, and figured on this move too long to change our minds. We're here now, and I guess the first thing we'll do is make camp for the night. Are you aiming to stop us?"

Welsh's young face was grim, showing the bunched muscle of his tight jaw.

"How can I—singlehanded?" he retorted. "But there's a lot more than me! Likely we'll be around to look you up again before the evening is finished. And maybe you'll think twice!"

Clutching the sleeping child tight against her the girl burst out angrily; "All right, cowman! Come back, and bring your friends—and your guns—and drive us out if you can!"

"Tush, child!" chided her father, gently.

Young Welsh, with a final angry glance at the girl, jerked reins and pivoted his bronc, clapped steel to it. He lifted the pony to a high lope and rode away without a backward look. Stubborn anger was in the set of his broad shoulders and erect, lean-hipped body. The brisk wind that tumbled through the valley trough whipped away the dust his pony's hoofs raised, and muffled the sound of the hoof beats as they thinned and faded.

An angry muttering ran through the ranks of the emigrant men. Alverson lifted his shoulders and sighed unhappily.

"Well," he said, "so much for that." He looked at Jim Hatfield, who had not ridden away with the furious cowboy. "But I guess you warned us, yesterday, what kind of a reception we might expect here. We wasn't unprepared."

"Then you're actually meaning to stay? In the face of range war, and drought?"

The farmer looked thoughtfully across the broad acres of the Sundust.

"This is good land," he finally said. "War can't change that. And the dry years will go. There's not much land left to be had, in Texas, that's near as good. Take a look at this map, mister!"

He dug out a folded paper and handed it over. Hatfield, opening it, saw that it was a copy of a Government map, showing the Sundust River and valley. Alternate sections of the bottom land were shaded, indicating the school lands open for purchase in the small amounts that had been prescribed by State law, to encourage the ownership of family-size farming units.

"We're here," Alverson said, "and we're taking our look at this land. If it turns out to what it promises, then we mean to buy. That's our privilege, as citizens of Texas!"

"One thing this doesn't show," Hatfield commented. With a lean forefinger he traced a line across the paper. "Clant Calder's fence! It stands between you and the land you want to look at. Have you decided how you mean to get past it?"

The farmer took the paper back, returned it to his pocket.

"We're pretty stubborn folks, Mr. Haycroft. We'll find a way. One thing we know for sure—the Government is behind us, and not behind any range-feuding cattlemen. The Government will see us through!" He straightened up briskly. "Right now our main concern is makin' a camp somewheres. We've come a long piece today. Our hosses are tired—to say nothin' of our wives and kids!"

Jim Hatfield shrugged. "Well, I wish you luck!" he said, for plainly there was nothing more that warnings and arguments could accomplish.

THE rest of the wagonmen were already hurrying back to their outfits. Hatfield reined aside and sat watching while they rolled away past him—a long line of tilt-topped wagons, trail-stained, one or two with a milch cow tied behind on the end of a tether. When the whole long line had passed, what held his thoughts most strongly was the face of Sally Alverson, sitting on the broad seat beside her father with the baby in her arms.

Sally had no mother, he had been told the day before, but had to be a mother herself to a small brother and sister. It was she, and the other nester women like her, who would suffer if these emigrants got involved in the bloodshed and violence that held sway on the Sundust.

Hatfield shook his head as he turned Goldy and sent him forward. In that moment he was close to admitting that he had finally met something that was too big, too involved, for any one man to lick.

Meanwhile, he had not forgotten the promise he had made Hap Jennings. The

man claimed to have valuable information, and somehow the Ranger was inclined to believe him something more than a crank. At any rate, he had every intention of keeping this strange rendezvous.

Close on the appointed time, he approached the draw to the west of town where the wagon road crossed it, and where a thicket of plum and willow made the dry barranca a place of shadow even at this hour of afternoon. He came toward it circumspectly, seeing no movement, and no one on the trail. He dropped down the graveled bank of the draw some three hundred yards away from the trail crossing, stepped out of saddle and, leaving Goldy in the overhang of a willow, moved forward on foot.

There was no sign of the man he was supposed to meet here, and for a moment the suspicion crossed his mind that he had been wrong about Hap Jennings, that after all the man was no more than the drunken irresponsible he looked to be. A rise of anger was lifting inside him as he stood there in the shadows and felt the slow ticking of the minutes passing.

Then he heard a sound.

It was a terrible kind of sound, a sort of bubbling, choking groan. It came from so near at hand that Hatfield had to restrain a quick leaping of taut nerves. Then, crashing through the dead brush, he pushed his way into a nook that was almost hidden against the eroded stream bank. Crumpled in a heap on stones and matted, rotting leaves a man lay in a huddle, face-down.

Turning him over, Hatfield saw the bloody wound that had soaked Hap Jennings' ragged clothing. His breath came sharply at sight of that wound, for it was an ugly one—made by the thrust of a knife blade. But the man was still alive, though barely so. Blood bubbled on his beard-stubbled lips with the rasp of his faint breathing. At Hatfield's touch the red-rimmed lids came feebly open, the eyes tried to waver to a focus.

"What happened?" Hatfield prodded, his voice hard. "Who did this to you, Hap?"

He was not certain the dying man even heard him, or that the blurred eyes knew him when at last they came to center on his face. But Jennings' lips moved faintly, and there was more blood on them. His shoulders lifted in a spasm, under the painful effort of speech.

Leaning close, Hatfield made out the choked, struggling words:

"Kid . . . done for me . . . like I seen him . . . do the Ranger—"

That was all. It had taken what life remained in him to get the thing said. A shudder ran through him and then he was limp in Hatfield's grasp. The Lone Wolf let him down onto the rank and rotting leaves and hunkered there in the quiet of the draw, stunned by what he had seen and heard.

He hated to believe this, but there was a dying man's testimony, and the mute evidence of the knife cut. He had come to like young Welsh, even knowing the youngster was hard, and wild, embittered by the cards that had been dealt him in the game of life. He hadn't believed the Kid would kill like this, though, but evidently the strain of violence ran deeper there than he had imagined.

Twice now, apparently, it had happened and this second time, Jim Hatfield's own questions about the range tramp must have put the Kid on the trail of his victim, watching Jennings suspiciously, and finally silencing him with cold and deadly steel before he could tell what he knew of the death of Buck Norman!

CHAPTER X

Alverson's Plan

WELL, Hatfield understood now the secret that had broken Hap Jennings. To have witnessed a vicious killing and afraid to tell of it, but also conscience-stricken at keeping silent—that must have been a terrible thing for a man to carry inside him. Now Hatfield knew, too, what had happened to Buck Norman. What would he do with this knowledge?

Hap Jennings, he figured, had been killed only a few minutes before he, himself, arrived here, so it should not be difficult to pick up the killer's trail. But Hatfield saw no need for haste. When he wanted Kid Welsh, he thought grimly, he would likely know where to find him.

He arose, returned to where he had left Goldy, and brought the horse back to where the dead man lay.

Goldy tossed his head, snorting at the smell of blood. Hatfield could not leave Jennings here like this. The man did not weigh much. It was not too difficult to get him up and jack-knifed across the sorrel's back. It was less than a mile to town, so Hatfield walked it, leading the horse with its grim burden.

It was getting along toward the tail end of afternoon now. Shadows were lengthening and the air already had a bite to it as the sun swung lower toward the west. Jim Hatfield had previously spotted the town undertaker's establishment and he went directly there with Jenning's body.

The undertaker had some questions to ask but Hatfield told him little—merely that he had found the body on the trail and had brought it in.

"I dunno," the undertaker protested. "Maybe you should have left him where you found him. Nobody cares nothing about Hap Jennings. Nobody's apt to pay for plantin' him, and I'm not wantin' to do it free!"

Hatfield dragged out his wallet, took a couple of bills from it.

"Any man deserves a decent burying. Can you do it for this?"

"Yeah, I suppose so. But you're throwing your money away . . . What does it matter to you, anyway?"

"Maybe nothing," Hatfield admitted, and left that place.

Some of Jennings' blood had dripped onto the saddle skirt, and he washed this off at a nearly-empty horse trough. Then he mounted and headed for the railway station, and the telegraph office.

He kept an eye out for the Triple C outfit, but none of Calder's riders were on the street. He wondered if they had guessed his part in helping the Kid escape from their hands, an hour ago. Maybe not; but CCC already had enough of a score against him, without that.

There was nothing for him at the telegraph station. He had expected an answer to his wire before now, and the lack of one stopped one line of his investigation. Well, it could wait. He thanked the telegrapher, went back to Goldy, and mounted. Leaving town, he headed west through the slanting light of late afternoon that put a golden haze across the Sundust graze.

The wagon emigrants had managed to find a rivulet of sweet spring water, and maybe a half acre of green grass around it for their horses. The place was a gathering point for range stock but they had made their camp here, appropriating the water for themselves. There was also plenty of dry chips, and with this abundance of fuel they had generous fires burning, one for each wagon family.

Jim Hatfield rode in on the busy scene, looking for the Alverson outfit. He found it near the center of camp. Sally had a stew simmering over the hot, dried-chip fire. She was also busy keeping her young brother and sister under control, after the restless confinement of the hours spent in the wagon. But she gave Hatfield a smile of welcome as he walked his sorrel up.

"Nice camp you got here," he told her approvingly.

As Sally murmured some answers, Ed Alverson stepped into view over the grounded wagon tongue.

"We'll have supper ready to eat in another ten minutes," he said. "Won't you tie up your hoss and have some with us?"

"Glad to. It sure smells good. Thanks."

THIS invitation was what he had wanted, because it gave him an excuse to hang around awhile.

He loosed the cinches, and slipped the bit so that Goldy could work at the scant grass with the gaunt-ribbed wagon horses. Then he returned to the Alverson rig, to make small talk with the family and wait for grub to be served.

The farmer was enthusiastic about the valley, now that he had seen a little more of it. He scooped up a handful of black dirt, ran it through blunt, work-hardened fingers.

"Put water on that," he exulted, "and it'll grow anything! And you needn't tell me water can't be had—not when that river manages to keep flowin' even after the dry seasons they've had here!"

Jim Hatfild didn't argue, because what the man said was true. It was something worse than drought that the Sundust faced.

After a bit Sally brought him a plate

of grub and cup of coffee. He was seated on the wagon tongue, eating, when what he had been waiting for happened.

Through the fading light, a bunch of riders came trailing dust toward the settlers' camp, and he knew before they were near enough to distinguish faces who they would be. Kid Welsh had kept his promise, and he had brought help with him this time—Tug Downing and some others of the toughs among them.

Quietly Hatfield set aside his tinware and came to a stand, watching. The riders seemed not to notice him as they plowed to a halt beside the fire. Ed Alverson walked forward to meet them.

"Well, this is your last chance!" the Kid said harshly. "The last chance to pack up and pull out of here, before somethin' you won't like happens to you. We don't want any trouble, but you've got to believe we mean what we say!"

"I've been hoping you'd show up," Alverson replied, in a tone of quiet assurance. "Our folks have been talking this over and we've got somethin' we'd like you to listen to. Step down a while."

Welsh and the others exchanged suspicious glances. Jim Hatfield stood at one side listening, wondering what the nester leader could be driving at.

Now the other members of the wagon outfit were straggling over to the Alverson fire, as they sensed what was going on. And young Welsh, shrugging, stepped down from saddle.

"All right," he said sharply, facing the nester leader. "I'm listenin'. What's on your minds?"

"We figure," said Alverson, "there's no good reason for us folks and your bunch, to clash. We both want the same thing—to see that fence come down, and the land and water Clant Calder is holdin' illegal turned free. That's right so far, ain't it?"

"So far," admitted Welsh, grudgingly. "But I wouldn't like it any better, having the Sundust turned over to a bunch of sodbusters!"

"Our differences can be settled later," Alverson insisted. "Right now, half a loaf is better than nothin'—and nothin' is what we're both apt to have unless we're willin' to work together."

Kid Welsh scowled. "And how do you figure a bunch of wagon emigrants can help us battle Clant Calder's gun crew?"

"We're not as helpless as we look. We got guns, and we can use 'em if we have to. And—we got our families!"

"What you driving at?"

"At the fact that this Calder wouldn't hardly dare make war against women and kids! Once get us through that wire and onto the school lands that's marked on the map in my pocket, and we can fort up with our families and hold out there until help comes. And help will come! That's Government land, meant for folks like us to buy and live on. If Calder tries to put us off by violence, word of it will spread all over Texas. The State Government will *have* to step in then, and settle it. They'll put Clant Calder in his place quicker than we could ever do by fighting!"

A MOMENT'S silence followed this startling statement. Young Welsh stared at Alverson. Finally he said: "You sound pretty sure of that!"

"Sure enough," said the farmer. "And we're not afraid—not any of us. Good land is worth a risk. Just help us get through the fence and we'll do the rest!"

Tug Downing shifted position.

"These sodbusters are crazy," he growled harshly. "It's a waste of time talkin' to 'em, Kid!"

"Maybe." But a new thought seemed to have struck the Kid, from the sudden change that had come into his face. "Still, it just might work—if we move tonight! The Triple C is in town, waitin' for that wire shipment and expectin' us to give 'em trouble. There'll be only a small guard on the fence. Suppose I was to take part of our men and act like we were goin' to bust through the wire somewhere. That would draw off the gate guard, and make it plumb easy for the wagons—"

"It's agreed, then?" Ed Alverson said excitedly.

"Just a minute!"

Jim Hatfield walked forward. He had been unnoticed until that moment. His face was grim as he confronted young Welsh, in the circle of wagon emigrants.

"This looks to me like suicide!" he announced. "I saw a CCC rider beat up an old woman today. Even though Calder might not be indecent enough to make

war on these nester families, as long as he's got men like Virg Massey on his payroll anything might happen. Don't you realize that? Or maybe you do, Kid, and you're willing to sacrifice these people, to gain your own selfish ends!"

"Why, you—" young Welsh began, his face tightening, and his hands balling into fists.

The nester leader cut him short, a dark look on his face as he answered Hatfield.

"That's a serious thing to say, mister. I'm a pretty good judge of people, generally, and I think I trust this young man. I'm for going ahead with our idea, in spite of anything you say!"

Hatfield's face was expressionless. "In that case," he said, "there's one way left for me to stop this madness! I'm putting you under arrest, Kid Welsh, for murder!"

CHAPTER XI

Prisoner!

MURDER! Ed Alverson's hoarse cry mingled with Sally's sharp intake of breath.

"What do you—"

"Who did he kill?"

"Two men," Hatfield said coldly, as the youngster stared at him as though stricken dumb. "One was a Texas Ranger, a man he most likely was afraid would try to interfere with his wire cutting. The other man was a witness he killed to silence him. He did for both of them with that knife he wears at his belt!"

"Lies!" Welsh had suddenly found his tongue. "Who are you anyway, Haycroft—to put anyone under arrest?"

"I'm not lying. Hap Jennings died in my arms, and he named you his killer. As for me—my name isn't Haycroft, Kid. It's Hatfield. I'm a Ranger."

"Hatfield!" cried one of the Kid's riders. "The Lone Wolf—"

One of the matched Colts had slid smoothly into Hatfield's fingers, leveled at Welsh.

"Put up your hands!"

The Kid stood with head thrust forward, right hand jerking nervously just above the haft of the pouched knife, but not quite touching it. His face had gone a sickly gray under its tan.

"But I didn't!" he said over and over. "I didn't! I never killed anybody!"

"I'll take the gun first," Hatfield said, coldly. "And that knife—"

It was as he reached to lift them from his prisoner's belt that the sky dropped without warning and landed squarely against the back of the Ranger's head.

He groaned once and folded up, limply. He was out before he quite hit the ground. . . .

The shuttling of a horse's legs mingled strangely with Jim Hatfield's blurred consciousness, and with the recurrent throb of pain in his head. He tried to move, but lacked the strength. Everything seemed strangely off kilter. His arms and legs swayed helplessly, while his pain-shot vision played odd tricks on him.

Gradually it came to him that he was lying face-down across the back of a horse, and that this explained why the world pitched and swung in such an unfamiliar manner. Before he could get any farther in arranging his impressions, however, blackness once more swept down and engulfed him. He lost touch with things again.

When he came to a second time it was in close, stuffy darkness. He lay on a hard floor with his long body jammed up into a cramped and impossible position. He stifled a groan, and tried to straighten his legs. It couldn't be done. They were not tied, but somehow he lacked the room.

Dazed, not understanding, he reached to touch his head, and winced. There was a swollen knot there, and a sore stickiness. He wondered how long he had been unconscious. More important, he wondered where he was now and why he had been brought here.

The gun-belts were gone from about his middle; that much he discovered quickly enough. Rolling over a little then, and grunting at the dizzy sickness it caused inside him, he got his hands against rough floor boards and pushed up to his knees. Walls were close about him. Pawing at them in the darkness he found a slick china door knob. It turned but the door wouldn't give to his shove. Locked.

He decided, suddenly, he had been dumped into a closet.

Even as the thought came another door somewhere opened, voices came to him, and the tramp of heavy boots shaking the floor as they drew nearer. Both voices were familiar, but for moments the prisoner failed to place them.

"—got him for safekeeping, yonder. You want to look and see I'm tellin' it straight?"

"No hurry. That's his bronc outside, sure enough. But you say the hombre's a Ranger?"

"Not just *a* Ranger! This here is Jim Hatfield himself. You've heard of the Lone Wolf, ain't you?"

"Who ain't!" said the other man's voice. "So *that's* who I've been tanglin' with! For the love of Pete!"

JIM HATFIELD recognized that voice now. It was red-bearded Virg Massey speaking, of course. The fellow's harelip distorted his speech, making it unlike that of anyone else. But the other man! Surely he couldn't be—

"Well, let's have the story," Massey said heavily. "I don't savvy yet your comin' to me with this, Downing. And my six-gun is gonna stay on your belt buckle till I'm sure you ain't tolled me here into some kind of a trap. We been on opposite sides in this war too long for me to trust you!"

Tug Downing! The man in the dark closet shook his sore head, not comprehending. Why had the tough gunman leader brought him here—to Massey? What were these two deadly enemies doing in the same room, anyhow, talking like conspirators?

"Let's set," said Downing's voice. "This may take a little time!"

The scrape of chair legs sounded, the creak as heavy men made themselves comfortable A lamp had been turned up, and its light washed in below the door. Putting an eye to the keyhole, Hatfield could see a section of sparsely furnished room, but neither of its occupants was in his line of vision.

"Massey," Tug Downing continued, "I'm thinkin' it's time we buried the hatchet. No point killin' each other in other gents' squabbles especially when, workin' together, we stand to make a real good deal for ourselves."

"Are you suggesting I sell out Calder?"

Downing laughed sneeringly. "Don't try that kind of gab with me. Calder pays good wages but not enough you can retire on in your old age. Besides, keep on fightin' his war for him and you won't have any old age, feller!"

"Yeah? Then just why are you sidin' Welsh and them sodbusters and such? I know *they* ain't paying you anything!"

"I don't like that fence!" said Downing. "Or *any* fences. They interfere with my business. I'm anxious to lay a loop on some of that prime beef under the CCC iron. Pickin's have been doggone poor, the last few months since that wire went up."

"Easier to find another part of the country to operate in!" suggested Massey sourly.

"Listen! This is Eighteen-eighty-four! There's fences everywhere. Looks like I'm gonna have to find a different line of work, but I been angling for one last big cleanup before I cut my stick. Well, I've got my chance. Tonight! And there's plenty in it for you, too, if you want to come in with me."

"Keep talkin'."

"Not so fast," said Tug. "I gotta know first where you stand—for sure. Make up your mind on that score or I don't say another word. I want your answer. Now!"

He only had to wait a moment. Then Massey's heavy voice said, "All right. I'll go along, if you can prove to me it's worth my time."

"I can do that, all right."

And Tug Downing told his story, while the prisoner in the closet listened in growing horror.

He told about Ed Alverson and the wagon emigrants, about the scheme that they and young Welsh had laid, jointly, for their attack on the CCC fence that night.

"Hatfield almost blew the thing wide open when he busted in and accused the Kid of killin' that tramp, Jennings, and the other Ranger that was here a couple of months ago. But I clipped him with a gun-barrel and shut him up. Then the Kid done some fast talking and made them nesters believe there was nothin' to the charge, and that they'd better go

ahead with their plans.

"They were worried about the Ranger being hurt, though, so I dumped him on his bronc and toted him into town—said I was gonna have the sawbones look at him. Instead, I brung him to this empty shack and hunted you up."

A HEAVY curse broke from Virg Massey.

"I'll smash them wagon tramps so blamed hard that—"

"That what? Use your head, Massey! Don't you see that tonight is the finish for the cattle interests on the Sundust, whatever way it comes out? Up till now we've had a two-sided feud that nobody outside the valley cared much about, one way or another. But let any of them women or kids get hurt, and it'll be a mighty different story. Why, the whole state will get up in arms. Clant Calder will be through, probably go to the pen. And you'll go with him, if you stay to be caught! That's why you best pull out while you can."

"But where does the clean-up you mentioned fit in?"

"There's two chances, and I can't cover them both. We can do it together, though. First off, that Triple C beef behind the fence. In the confusion tonight a good-sized bunch can be run off into the hills, and I've got a good, quick-paying market already set up there to take the beefs off our hands. Besides that, I've found out that them wagon emigrants have a chest-ful of money with them in their train—cash they've pooled to buy the school lands they aim to settle on. We'll want that, too. We'll let the attack go ahead like they've planned it. The Kid and his small-tally friends are goin' to pretend to make a thrust at the wire, somewheres east of the road, to draw the guard. Me and my boys are supposed to back up the wagon folks when they go in through the gate."

"So?"

"You take some men you can trust, make a quick gather of as many head of Calder stock as you can handle on short notice, and ram them through the fence while the raid is going on to cover you. I'll be picking up the emigrants' money chest. They'll have guns, but since they trust me and my crew it won't be hard to get the drop on 'em and wipe them out if they give fight. We'll join you in the hills later, get rid of the cattle and split the loot between us—even." He added meaningly, "Alverson's got a right pretty gal in his wagon. I may take her along. But no divvies there, you understand!"

"I ain't interested in that!" growled Massey. "Cold cash is what my men and I are after, and it looks like that fool Calder is about finished as a source of it! All right! You've made a deal. Most of our crew is here in town tonight, waiting for that shipment of wire. I'll pick the men I want and start after the cattle. There's three good-sized bunches I have in mind that can be thrown together to make a haul of maybe seven, eight hundred head. But it'll mean some fast work."

There was the sound, then, of the men getting to their feet, these two who had fought on opposite sides, but who now plotted to desert their allies and turn this range war to their own advantage.

"Hey!" Massey's voice came again, sharply. "What about *him*—that Ranger?"

Tug Downing laughed harshly. "The Lone Eagle? Oh, he'll keep. The way I've fixed him he won't get out of that closet—not a chance—until *maybe* somebody finds him *after* we've lit a shuck."

A moment later the lights were snuffed out. Boots clomped across the rough flooring; a door slammed. After that, silence, and the stuffy blackness of the closet.

CHAPTER XII

At the Hotel

A LONG moment passed while the truth dawned on Jim Hatfield. Those men were so sure that he was so completely helpless, so well imprisoned, that they were willing to go off and leave him while they exulted in the excitement of their ambitious program. But still, that didn't mean that one or the other of them might not be so sure the Ranger would stay put, and would return at almost any instant to finish him off and make sure.

He pushed against the crowding wall

and finally got to his feet, still sick after the vicious clout from Tug Downing's gun butt. He stood swaying for a moment, gathering his strength. Then, prodded by the need for haste, he hurled himself against the closed door.

There was not room enough for him to collect himself for a lunge, and he only caromed off the panel and slammed against the rear wall, fighting his own weakness in him. He would never break out of here that way. The door was too solid, the lock and hinges too stout, for him to ram through. There had been good reason for Tug's confidence. For the Ranger realized he would need a greater focusing of force, a better leverage than seemed possible.

Straightening, the top of his head struck a pole which ran crosswise of the closet, from which clothing had once been strung. He reached up, tested its sturdiness. Then, grasping it with both hands, he set his back against the rear wall of the closet and, braced like that, lifted his booted feet, bent knees against his chest. With all the muscular strength of legs hardened by years of saddlework, he lashed forward.

His boot heels struck the door with ramrod force, and the jar of it ran all the way up into his spine that was braced against the back wall. The door stood firm, but he had heard a splintering crack as his heels smashed into the panel. Clutching the pole overhead, he lifted his legs again and repeated the action, twice over. And with the third kick, the lock snapped! The door swung out violently, to slam against the wall of the room beyond.

Jim Hatfield's hands were wrenched loose from the pole and he was thrown to the floor by the lunge that freed him. Dizzy from the impact, his head still throbbing from the blow of Tug Downing's gun-barrel, he got to hands and knees and rested long enough for the darkness to quit spinning about him, and then pushed to his feet and went groping his way hurriedly across the dark room, hunting for a door.

He found one, unlocked, and opened it on the chill darkness of full night. The moon had not yet risen, and the black shadows under the trees that surrounded the shack were opaque and solid.

Hatfield sidestepped through the door and halted, listening. Somewhere near at hand a horse stamped once, bit chain clinking. But there was no other sound and he knew the bronc was riderless. Hatfield moved cautiously in the direction of the sound. He saw the dim shape of the horse against the thicker darkness.

"Goldy?"

The horse stamped again. A moment later Hatfield had reached the sorrel and was returning Goldy's anxious greeting with a friendly slap on the neck.

It had been a real break for him, the sorrel being left tied here beside the shack, though of course those owlhoots meant to return for such a beautiful mount. Goldy's saddle was on his back, his reins tied to a sapling. And Hatfield's twin Colts, in their holsters and brass-filled gunbelts, had been looped carelessly about the pommel. More loot somebody meant to return to pick up. It took him only a moment to buckle them in place around his hips and then, after checking the cinches, to take the reins and swing into saddle.

His head still hurt but the worst of the nausea had left him. He had lost his hat, and the night chill blowing against his face did a lot to revive him after the time he had spent in that cramped and ill-smelling closet.

He saw now that the shack where he had been held prisoner stood all alone at a remote end of the little valley town. Through the bare tree trunks he could spot the pattern of lamplight which marked the crisscross of the two principal streets. He looked at them, pondering what he had overheard and the shape of the program Downing and Virg Massey had arranged between them when they hadn't even cared if he heard every word they spoke.

TIME was slipping fast through his fingers. He had to decide quickly what he could do to counteract their schemes and prevent the bloody climax they planned shortly to loose upon the valley and on the hapless wagon emigrants.

He spoke to Goldy and rode forward, bearing toward the town lights. He had only one hope, and a dubious one at best, of averting disaster.

The sorrel's shoe irons crunched cinders and clanged against a steel rail as he crossed the railroad switch at the head of the main street, pulling wide of a couple of box cars on the siding. He had just circled the freight station and turned into the wide street when a sudden yell brought him around quickly.

A man stood on the scarred wooden platform, gesturing to him. By the lantern on the wall behind him, Hatfield saw that it was the telegraph operator and station agent, and that the man was waving a piece of paper.

Hatfield reined back.

"I just noticed you ridin' by," the man said "This answer came to your wire, not a half-hour ago. Looks like sure enough dynamite!"

Hatfield mumbled his thanks as he took the wire, looked at it in the lantern light. In the events of the past few hours, he had almost forgotten the request for information that he had sent his chief, McDowell. Here was the answer, and it was a lengthy one. He read quickly, and knew a lift of excitement at what he learned.

"This is what I wanted, all right!" he told the station agent, slapping the paper against his palm. "It's even more than I hoped for! Thanks again!"

And then, knowing he had the key he needed to unravel this mess provided he used it right, he sent Goldy away and at a good clip along the street, bringing him to a sliding halt at the hitchrack before the hotel and saloon.

Only a few of the CCC mounts that had been tied here earlier were at the rail now, he noticed. He swung down, dropped Goldy's reins over the pole and stepped around it, hurried across the warped sidewalk and up the two steps to the swinging doors of the saloon half of the big building. Lights, the hum of voices, and clink of whisky glasses met him as he shoved open the batwings.

Four customers were in the barroom, a couple elbowing the bar and two more playing checkers with beer bottle caps for pieces, at a table near the drum stove where a fire was roaring.

Surveying their faces quickly, Hatfield decided that none of these four had been in the group with Virg Massey when he had tried last night to hang young Welsh, or with Link that afternoon at the Dakins ranch. They differed in appearance from Massey's hand-picked tough crew, were ordinary cowhands, and though they wore guns due to the evil nature of the times they did not look as though they had been hired for their skill with guns.

Hatfield went over to the two men at the bar and touched one on the elbow. The man, a grizzled veteran, looked around at him suspiciously.

"I'd like to talk to your boss," the Ranger said. "He around?"

Not answering at once, the oldster ran a hard look over the lean stranger. His eyes lingered significantly on the matched Colts thonged down on the hard thighs, lifted to the dark face again.

"Depends," he answered shortly. "You lookin' for Clant Calder? Or Virg Massey?"

"Which one do you call your boss?"

He thought he read correctly the look that came into the old man's face as he spoke the name of the bully foreman. The man's mouth twisted thinly.

"I rode for Calder ten years before that Massey gent come onto this range with his tough friends," he said, and his dislike for Massey was plain.

Hatfield nodded. "I thought as much. It's Calder I want to talk to—and it's about something plenty important."

"You'll find him upstairs," said the old cowhand, as the other CCC riders turned to stare at the stranger. "Room Twenty-seven. He always stays there when he's in town. Massey pulled out some time ago, and took a bunch with him. I dunno where they went."

WHEELING about, Hatfield strode quickly across the barroom and through the batwings into the hotel lobby. He could feel the stares of those loyal Calder hands following him.

At the head of the stairs he walked down a narrow, lamplit corridor. He could hear someone moving about behind the door of Number 27. A rap at the panel brought him Clant Calder's sharp query:

"Who's there?"

For answer, Hatfield repeated his knock. There was an impatient exclamation, then the CCC owner's quick stride

to the door, the turning of a key in the lock. The door swung open. Piercing blue eyes stared at him from beneath a shelf of grizzled, heavy brows.

"You!"

The visitor nodded. "Me," he said and, with a knee against the door, he pushed it wide before the rancher could make a move to stop him, and slipped into the room.

A wall lamp laid its yellow glow across these two who were so nearly of a height but otherwise so different. Calder, scowling, started to slide a hand in under the gap of his open jacket, but Hatfield shook his head quickly.

"I wouldn't do that. I'm not here to make trouble, but to show you a couple of things. The first is—this!"

He opened his fingers. Calder, hand arrested on its way toward the shoulder holster, blinked a couple of times as he peered at what lay revealed in his caller's palm. His eyes stabbed the other man's face again.

"A Ranger badge!"

Hatfield nodded. "And I have a suspicion that you're a man that badge might mean something to—more than it would to some I've met here on the Sundust. My name is Hatfield."

"Jim Hatfield?" A note of respect was in the gaunt rancher's voice.

"That's right." The Lone Wolf pocketed the badge, and brought out the answer to his wire to Captain Bill McDowell.

"Here's the other thing I wanted to show you. It just came from my chief, in Austin. I asked him if there wasn't something in the files on a red-headed man who might have raised a beard in order to cover up a harelip. Seemed to me I remembered something, vaguely, about a man of that description, and I wanted to check to make sure . . . Do you know what answer I got?"

Calder's head jerked sharply, the eyes hard and cold behind shielding lids. Then Clant Calder shook his head slowly.

"I don't have the slightest idea," he said, his voice tight. Without a word, Hatfield handed him the telegram.

NEXT ISSUE
LONG SAM RIDES THE RIVER
By LEE BOND

CHAPTER XIII

A Ride to Make

FOR a long moment after Calder had the wire in his hand, he still looked in questioning silence at the face of the Ranger. Then he lowered his glance to the paper and his lips moved, forming the words, as he started to read:

YOUR HARELIPPED MAN SOUNDS LIKE ONE VIRGIL KIDD WANTED FOR THE PAST TEN YEARS FOR TRAIN ROBBERY AND KILLING STOP DEADLY WITH A KNIFE . . .

The CCC boss broke off his reading, lifted his eyes again to Hatfield's, but now those steely eyes were dark with shock and struggling disbelief.

"This can't . . . I swear I never knew—"

"I didn't think you did," said the Lone Wolf. "You've struck me all along as a hard man, and a tough fighter, but not one of Virg Massey's stripe, or a man who would knowingly hire a killer to rod his spread for him. And a killer is what Massey—or rather, Virgil Kidd—is. He killed the Ranger who came on this job before me, and this afternoon he put a knife into Hap Jennings to keep him from telling me about it. I got to Jennings just before he died, and he tried to tell me that Kidd had murdered him. But, not knowing then what Massey's real name was, I thought he meant Kid Welsh. I came near making a terrible mistake, thinking it."

Clant Calder seemed to have been dealt a telling blow. Some of the fierceness and ramrod stiffness had gone out of him and he looked suddenly like what he was—an old and tired man. He put a hand against the metal of the hotel bed as though to steady himself.

"You haven't finished the telegram," said Hatfield.

"I—my eyes aren't so good, in this light," the rancher muttered. He handed back the paper. "Maybe you better tell me what it says."

"All right, I will. The State Legislature has finally done, today, what you said you wished they would, Calder. They've

passed laws covering the use of barbed wire on the open range. You told me this morning that if there were laws on the books you'd abide by them. Are you prepared to do that now?"

"Let's hear them!" Calder said heavily.

The Ranger stabbed a lean, hard finger at the lengthy message from Bill McDowell, ticking off the points. "First: Fence cutting is henceforth a crime against the State."

The fierce eyes sharpened. "Ha!" exclaimed Calder. "Then—"

"Wait for the rest! Secondly: It is also a criminal offense to maintain fences in such a way as to enclose public lands, or obstruct public roads or thoroughfares. And third: In every fence, gates must be maintained at each three-mile interval!"

As he finished, Calder's stern face had gone empty as the meaning of all this struck home.

Hatfield pocketed the telegram. "You see the point. You've won your war against the fence cutters, but in a larger sense you've lost it, too. Because, from now on, a fence is not to be the kind of a barrier you've made it here on the Sundust. You can't keep your neighbors away from grass and water they need, or settlers away from the public land to which they have every legal right. Most of that wire will have to come down to free the public land that doesn't belong to you, and from the public roads you've blocked. You'll still have a fence—or what's left of it. But your empire, Clant Calder, is finished!"

Whatever reaction he had expected, he was a little surprised when it came. He hadn't been prepared for the sudden, beaten look of defeat that settled on Calder's face, the dullness of his fierce blue eyes as he turned away a little, his straight shoulders all at once drooping with weariness.

"I'm almost glad, just to have this thing settled!" Clant Calder said then. "It was a bad mistake, bringing Massey or whatever his name is into the valley. But he guaranteed, if I gave him a free hand, to keep the rustlers away from my stock, to keep the small-tally men from ruining the graze and water, to keep out farmers and their plows. I had too much at stake not to take him up on it, and when I learned what his methods turned out to be, I was already in too deep myself to back out."

HE PAUSED a moment, pressed a hand to his eyes.

"I couldn't see any other way but this one to save my holdings," he went on, "so I went ahead with the war. But I got sicker of it every week that passed. I've tried to hold Virg back. Today, he and his gunmen would have killed young Welsh, right here in town. There was some shooting, but Welsh forted up in the livery barn and I wouldn't stand for them going in after him. But sometimes I wouldn't know about these things until after they had happened—"

"Like the Ranger's killing?" Hatfield prompted. "Or Link's visit to the Dakins place this afternoon?"

"Like those," Calder agreed, in a dead tone. "I wasn't sure about the Ranger. I suspected, all right, when he disappeared, but Virg made me believe he didn't know a thing about it and—well, I'm afraid I wanted to believe him."

His hand tightened on the metal of the bedstead. Then it loosened and fell to his side, and Calder dragged in a deep breath.

"And now I'm licked. Somehow, it doesn't seem to matter much!"

"You're a man, Calder!" Jim Hatfield said. "Maybe this isn't going to turn out quite as much a total loss for you as you think. But we're going to have to move, now—and move fast!

The head with the sharp-beaked nose lifted. "What do you mean?"

As briefly as possible Hatfield outlined the desperate plan he had learned from the talk of Virgil Kidd and Tug Downing in the deserted shack.

"There'll be a bloody finish," he said, "and you'll lose a good bunch of stock unless we do something to prevent it pronto! Massey—or Kidd—has already slipped out of town with his hand-picked crew, but I saw a few of your men still in the bar downstairs. Maybe more now. You better collect them and ride!"

Calder had already started for the door, grabbing his hat from the bed as he went.

"Some of the men ridin' fence are also loyal to me," he said. "I'll pick 'em up, along the line. I think I know the cattle

Virg has his eyes on. He'll have us outnumbered, but we'll give him a fight!" For a moment he paused and looked at Hatfield steadily, his eyes flashing now. "All I hope is that I can notch my sights on that killer! I brought him into this valley, so I figure it's up to me to rid it of him!"

"Don't forget," Hatfield reminded him, grimly, "the Rangers have a claim staked on him! Gunning him down is too easy for him. We'd like him alive!"

"I'll try to remember," gritted Calder, "but I'm not promising. What's *your* program, Hatfield?"

"I got a ride to make," said the Lone Wolf. "While you're stopping Kidd, I've got to blunt the other prong of this pincers play and save those wagon people from Downing's treachery. Given a break —and my sorrel's speed—I think I can do it."

Minutes later, with Goldly running strongly beneath him and the dark ground blurring past, Hatfield had dropped the lights of town behind him and was heading north and west toward the fence. The rising moon was a smear of brightness beyond the swell of the horizon.

The Lone Wolf hadn't waited for Calder to gather his loyal riders and find horses and come with him. There wasn't time. With only brief moments to rest the sorrel, he sped through the night stillness as the moon rolled into view, bringing its light to aid him in his mile-consuming run.

Presently he came across a rise, and the fence lay ahead of him—a streak of reflected moonlight, slashing across the darkness of the valley floor.

Hatfield pulled rein and sat like that for long and impatient minutes with the sorrel blowing under him, as he searched the night for sound and movement. Then, ahead of him, he caught the blurred shapes of a group of horsemen crossing the open flats, pointing for the fence. This was what he had been looking for!

IMMEDIATELY he sent Goldy forward again, pounding hard in a line straight toward where he had glimpsed those riders. The wind was at his back but still the sound of them came constantly stronger. From this he knew he was gaining and hoped he could overtake them before they hit the fence. There would be gunfire, after that, and probably it would be too late.

But no—there they were, in front of him. They had heard Goldy's running approach and had hauled up, waiting, to see who this lone rider was and what it could be he wanted. Moonlight glinted on more than one drawn gun-barrel, and as he reined Goldy to a sliding stop he heard young Welsh break out a sharp curse.

"It's that Ranger!"

Hatfield got his sorrel steadied and looked squarely into the muzzle of the Kid's leveled gun. He didn't touch either of his own weapons. He was going to accomplish this with words or not at all.

"That's right, Kid," he said. "It's Hatfield. And I've got plenty to tell you."

"I'll tell you this!" Welsh cut in harshly. "You're not arrestin' me for any killin' I didn't do!"

Hatfield nodded. "I've learned by now I was wrong about that. Jennings and Buck Norman were killed by the man you folks know as Virgil Massey."

"Massey!" one of the Kid's group cried out. He added grimly, "Then I guess that clinches the case against Triple C!"

The Ranger swiveled him a quick look, recognized the man's tired, worn features.

"Dakins! So you decided finally to put in your vote for violence, did you?"

"Yes! And time I did!" Tom Dakins almost shouted his defiance. "You tried to talk me into staying neutral, but it was already too late for that. After this afternoon, the Triple C wouldn't have let me, even if I'd been willing to swaller what they did to me and Marthy. I've joined the Kid! And the rest of us who held back before are with us, too. We're gonna shove this business to a finish, and we're gonna do it before tonight is any older!"

"You figure to try and stop us, Hatfield?" young Welsh said.

The Ranger piled his hands upon the saddle-horn, looked squarely at the young leader of the small-tally, free grass ranchers. "I'm going to try and stop you from walking into a trap," he said, and went on, his voice rising above the muttering of the dozen men he faced. "Yes, that's what I said! A trap, planned by Tug

Downing and Virg Massey to get you out of the way while they carry out their own crooked aims."

"Downing— Massey?" The Kid's voice was vibrant with disbelief. "That knock on the head must have done something to you, Ranger! Why, Tug Downing is our friend! He's in this as deep as we are! Now you better stand aside. We got our end of a job to do and time is wastin'!"

"Go ahead with this, Kid, and you'll regret it to the end of your days! I tell you, I know what I'm saying. But it won't be you who pays the worst price. It'll be those wagon people. And— Sally Alverson!"

That name jarred young Welsh where nothing else the Ranger had to say could touch him. He jerked around as he was turning away, his hand holding the reins halted in midair.

"What was that?" he demanded.

Hatfield told then what he knew, in a brief and persuasive rush of words.

"Maybe you still don't believe me," he finished. "But can you afford the risk? Even if there's just the remotest chance that what I say is true—can you go ahead and expose the girl to that danger?"

There was a taut silence. At last young Welsh exclaimed, in an altered voice:

"I'll get the straight of this! And if there's anything to it . . . *Come on!*"

CHAPTER XIV

Battle!

THE men with young Welsh were all skeptical, but they accepted the Kid's lead. At most, it would mean postponing the attack a fraction of an hour, and from Welsh's tone it was plain that a small but real suspicion had started working at him. The threat to the Alverson girl had done it, even if he didn't care what happened to the rest of the emigrant party.

Hatfield fell in beside the Kid and they went rolling across the flats, backtracking toward the distant town road.

"We left the train in a walnut grove a quarter mile from the gate," Welsh told the Ranger. "They were to give us thirty minutes to start our attack and draw off the guard."

"Then we better hurry! When that half-hour is up, the Alversons will be in plenty of hot water!"

Nothing more was said. They rode in silence except for the mingled sound of hoofs drumming the sod. Presently young Welsh said:

"The place is just beyond that hogback ridge."

"Let's dismount here," Hatfield suggested quickly. "We got a few minutes' to spare—enough to make the rest of the distance on foot. The wind's wrong and they probably haven't heard our horses, yet, so if we can sneak in on 'em you'll have a chance to see for yourselves that I've told this to you straight."

Welsh pulled rein, grunting approval. "Hit the ground!" he ordered his men. "We'll have to move fast, but make as little noise as possible doing it!"

They left their horses ground-hitched and moved forward on foot, stepping high to keep spur rowels from dragging. Jim Hatfield was at Welsh's elbow as the group went swarming up the shallow rise of the hogback. Beyond were the trees, and in a narrow gap below the breakoff was the twisting wagon road.

The moonlight did not slant full into the gap, but from the rise they could see dimly the line of wagons below, the canvas making vague blotches against the dark. Harness jingled; a horse stamped nervously now and then. The wagon people were in their loaded rigs, and the horsemen flanking the line of wagons were Tug Downing's men.

A tense air of waiting lay over the whole scene.

"Well, here we are," young Welsh whispered to Hatfield. "I don't see nothin' wrong. They're just holding back for the deadline. I think you've been all wrong, Hatfield!"

"Just hang on a minute!" Hatfield answered grimly.

One of the Downing riders had walked his bronc alongside the forward wagon. He reined in there, and across the stillness the voice of Tug Downing himself came plainly:

"What time you got now, Alverson?"

A match flared briefly as the man on the seat of the wagon consulted a huge turnip watch from a pocket of his blue

overalls. The flame showed Sally sitting beside her father, between him and the big solid shape of Downing on his horse, beside the wagon.

The watchers couldn't hear whatever reply Ed Alverson made to the outlaw's question, but before the match light flickered out they all clearly saw the gun come sliding into Downing's hand. And then Tug Downing's voice lifted in a shout, down the line of wagons:

"All right, men! *Take over!*"

Ed Alverson's squawk of startled incomprehension was lost under the shouts of Downing's riders as they closed in on the file of wagons, with bared weapons lifting.

"Don't anybody touch a gun!" shouted the leader. "You're covered and we'll drill the first to move! You, Alverson—that box of money you got stowed under the seat. We want it!"

Young Welsh broke the grip of astonishment and horror.

"Why, the dirty snake!"

Next moment he was up and running. His men went swarming after him, over the hogback ridge and down the wooded slope.

Colts flaming, Jim Hatfield was in the van.

IT WAS doubtful if the wagon people would have offered any resistance to Tug Downing, taken as they were so completely by surprise. But this sudden eruption of running men down the slope of the hogback changed the picture before the outlaws had a chance to take control. As Downing's toughs whirled to meet unexpected danger, the men on the wagons grabbed their momentary opportunity and went digging for weapons.

All at once guns were racketing in the shadowed hollow, under the bare branches of the walnut trees.

Hatfield, slipping and sliding down the treacherous footing of the slope, made for the lead wagon. He wanted to come to grips with Downing himself. But he was held up as a gun blasted directly in front of him, the scorch of the muzzle flame blindingly close. The slug screamed past, and bark from the slim trunk of a tree at his elbow stung his bronzed face.

He halted, on legs braced against the pitch of the slope, and triggered into the smear of gun flame that filled his vision. A horse squealed in terror, the sound mingling with a choked cry of pain. There wasn't any other shot. The horse went clattering by and an empty stirrup flopped against the Ranger's arm as he sidestepped.

He stood there a second, blinking to rid his eyes of the dazzling after-image of that gun blast. The smell of powder-smoke and stirring dust tanged the air, and all around were the shouts of men, the squeal and stamp of horses and pound of guns. A woman screamed, like the stroke of a knife blade across the other sounds.

Hatfield started running again, though his sight had not fully cleared yet of fire-dazzle. A beam of moonlight was just touching the Alverson wagon, through the tree heads. Young Welsh, he saw, had beaten him there. The Kid stood spread-legged and cursed as he traded lead with Tug Downing who held his restive bronc down with one firm hand and worked his six-gun in the other.

He was a deadly shot. Ed Alverson made a crumpled shape upon the wagon seat, where Downing had laid him out with a bullet when the nester leader had tried to reach the rifle at his feet. And now young Welsh staggered and spun half around as a bullet from Downing's weapon knocked him backward. The Kid almost caromed into Hatfield. Then the Ranger was lifting his own Colts, shouting Downing's name.

Still partially blinded by the after-image of that other gun, he lost his target and held off the trigger for a fraction of a second, trying to locate it again. It was a fateful delay for, as he hesitated, Tug Downing moved.

The outlaw, standing in stirrups, whirled toward the Alverson wagon. One hand reached for Sally who was crouching in frozen terror beside her father's body. Tug got her about the waist and then, with no effort at all, jerked her across onto his saddle. Sally fought him furiously, but in spite of her struggles he held her.

"Quit shootin' if you don't want to kill this girl!" he yelled.

Young Welsh, with blood streaming from a bullet-swiped leg, cursed but held his fire, helplessly. All too clearly, he

couldn't risk a shot with the struggling girl shielding Downing's body. Then Tug Downing was whirling his bronc. In another instant he would make his getaway, without the chest of money, but with another prize in his arms.

At that instant Jim Hatfield dived forward.

His left arm reached for the head of Downing's bronc. Groping fingers touched the bridle and clamped down on it. The momentum of the whirling bronc yanked the Ranger off his feet and slammed him hard against its shoulder, but after that he got his heels in the dirt and pulled the bronc's head down, throwing it offstride.

He heard Tug Downing's vicious curse, and the outlaw's gun thundered again. A skewer of fire streaked across Hatfield's shoulder. Still he didn't let go his hold on the bridle, but instead whipped up his own gun. In that second he had a brief, clear target, without danger to Sally Alverson. As he fired he thought he could almost hear the bullet strike home into Downing's chunky body.

THE man reeled backward in the saddle. Then, as Sally slipped from his grasp, Hatfield freed the horse's bridle and caught the girl to steady her.

Young Welsh was there and Hatfield handed her to him, and turned back to make certain of Downing. The man's horse had galloped on. Downing lay on the ground in the wagon road, unmoving. The Ranger knew he was dead.

Satisfied with that, he turned back toward the wagons.

The shooting had thinned out, and it died now as abruptly as it had begun, to the quickly fading drumbeat of departing horses' hoofs.

"What's left of the varmints are makin' as fast a getaway as they can!" someone yelled. "We licked 'em for fair!"

Emigrant men came hurrying along the line of wagons, running forward with guns and rifles smoking, all yelling at once, excitedly. In one of the rigs Hatfield could hear a child whimpering in terror. But the fight was over.

He swung quickly up the wheel to the seat of the Alverson wagon, for a look at the nester leader. At his touch Alverson groaned and stirred, his head lifting. Hatfield saw then that he was not badly hurt. He dropped down again, flexing his own injured shoulder. Sally came hurrying toward him, with young Welsh's arm protectively about her.

"Dad!" she cried hoarsely.

"Better look after him," the Ranger told her. "And the youngsters are crying. But it's going to be all right." He swung to meet the men who crowded up around him. "What were the casualties?"

"Nothin' bad," an emigrant said. "Howard Rollins got drilled in the arm, and one of the ranchers took a flesh wound. That seems to be the extent of it."

"You showed us, Ranger, that you knew what you were talkin' about all along," Tom Dakins said. "Thanks to our stubbornness, Tug Downing almost got what he wanted out of these here people. After this, we'll listen to you!"

Hatfield looked about, saw agreement in every face.

"I'm glad to hear that," he said. "Because this job is only half finished! Clant Calder and a handful of his loyal riders are probably fighting it out, right now, with Massey's whole gun crew. They need our help!"

He sensed the quick resistance this met in the small-tally men. Young Welsh voiced their thought.

"And why?" he demanded sharply. "What's the idea of our mixin' into it, after all we've taken from Triple C?

Ranger Jim Hatfield Rides a Trail

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Let 'em fight! Let 'em wipe each other out, if they want to. We stand to gain!"

The Lone Wolf turned on him. "Maybe I know how you feel," he said sharply, "but I can't agree with you! Selfishness put this valley into the mess it's in—selfishness that won't do any good after today. The State Legislature's new laws have settled that! Clant Calder knows his mistakes, and from now on he'll be a different man to get along with. But the time to bury the hatchet is now—when he needs help, and you can give it to him!"

Nobody answered him, for a long moment. Young Welsh stood stiff and unyielding, his companions showing no urge to argue with him or add their voices to Hatfield's persuasions.

"Calder killed my dad, and my brother," the Kid said then, tightly. "He burnt out our ranch. He—"

"Virgil Massey did those things," Hatfield corrected him. "It wasn't at Calder's orders, but Calder wasn't strong enough to hold him back. If revenge is what you want, Massey's your man—and your last chance at him is maybe running out right this minute!"

Welsh made an angry gesture. "Oh, the devil with revenge!" he bit out harshly, and turned on his men. "Somebody fetch the hosses! Whatever the rest of you do, I'm ridin'—to lend Clant Calder a hand!"

CHAPTER XV

Feud's End

RUMBLING sound, resembling thunder except that there could be no thunder on this starry, moon-etched night, was the first thing to give them direction. They had found no guard on the gate, and since passing it had been riding blind, not certain where the renegade CCC foreman would have planned his attack. Jim Hatfield halted the cavalcade with an uplifted hand, reining down Goldy as he spoke to young Welsh who was riding at his stirrup.

"Listen! They're moving cattle—hard! Off to the west, isn't it?"

"That's how it sounds to me!" cried the Kid, and kicked his own bronc forward.

Strung out now, with a goal to point them, they pressed on at a faster gait—small-tally men, riding to the aid of the CCC boss who had been their enemy only short hours before. With them rode some of the wagon men, in the saddles of horses which had been ridden by Tug Downing's beaten crew.

The thunder of running cattle came steadily louder, and then the wind that fanned the sage brought them a new sound—the firecracker popping of guns. Suddenly, sweeping across a bulge of ground, they came in sight of the guns, firefly sparks across the rolling ground.

In the distance was the shining scimitar stroke of the Sundust. They could see the dark mass of a large bunch of cattle, streaming down toward the river flats.

"A stampede!" young Welsh cried. "They were heading 'em for the wire when Calder must have hit the front of the herd and turned 'em with gunfire!"

There was confusion now of bawling, frightened steers, and streaking guns. The sting of lifted dust and burnt powder hit their nostrils as the reinforcements spurred forward, straight toward the scene. Goldy put Hatfield far in the lead as they came down the slope. It was Hatfield who drew the first shot from one of those guns.

[*Turn page*]

of Mystery in Tascosa Town!

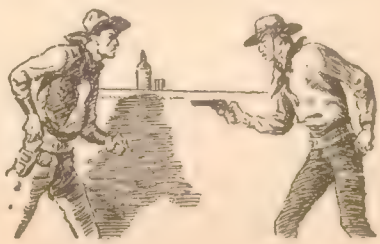
•

THE BLOODY YEARS

An Exciting Action Novel

By JACKSON COLE

COMING NEXT MONTH



The bullet missed widely. The flash of the muzzle flame gave him a brief glimpse of one of the old-timers he had seen in the hotel bar, a loyal CCC rider.

"Hold it!" he shouted. "We're friends!"

There was no second shot. Then he was in the thick of the thing himself.

Moonlight gilded the streaking dust that blurred a man's vision. The bawling of frightened cattle mingled with the yammer of guns. Unable to stem the stampede and turn the cattle back onto CCC range, the renegades were letting the beefs scatter past them and, holding their ground, were trying to wipe out the loyal Calder men whom they outnumbered by three to one. But the arrival of help turned the scale.

Hatfield pressed ahead, the small-tally men at his back. He triggered at a dimly-seen figure through the dust haze and saw a man topple backward out of saddle. A gun lashed at him, leaving a trail of powder spark hanging in the air. The man with the gun shaped up big in the saddle; Virgil Massey—or Kidd—himself, Hatfield thought. He threw around for a shot but just then a steer flashed by under Goldy's nose, startling the sorrel, and the Ranger missed his target.

He shot the gun dry, pouched it and snatched out the other weapon from his left-hand holster. All around him now the free grass men were giving battle. With the herd scattered, the CCC renegades wouldn't stand long against that kind of gunplay. They were already pulling back, breaking for the open as they saw the uselessness of keeping up the battle. All at once, it turned into a rout. Like Tug Downing's crew, Massey's bunch had broken before a determined, wholehearted attack.

Seeing the complete collapse of resistance, Hatfield let the stragglers go and reined back. They had done enough damage. In the hoof-punched ground lay more than one huddled, lifeless shape of a Massey tough who would never again steal another man's cattle, or put terror into the hearts of peace-loving men.

A tall, beak-nosed man, stoop-shouldered and gaunt, had dismounted and stood with reins in hand, looking down at one of those lifeless forms. He lifted his head as Hatfield rode toward him.

"You wanted him alive," Clant Calder said, in a tired voice, "but I said I wouldn't promise!"

"Massey?"

"Right there."

CALDER gave the dead man a prod with his boot toe and the body rolled over onto its back, limply. The red of his beard and the blood that smeared his lfeless barrel chest alike looked black under the moon.

After the gunfire, the silence of the night was like a blessing. The rest of them had ridden up—free grass men and CCC riders. Clant Calder looked about at the grim faces of the mounted men. He singled out Kid Welsh, who sat slewed around a little in leather to favor his bullet-swiped leg.

"Welsh?" said the CCC boss hoarsely. "Why are you here? With all the bad blood there's been between you and me?"

The Kid shifted a little. "Something the Ranger, here, said," he muttered. "Something about selfishness."

"He's right!" Clant Calder agreed. He went on, doggedly, standing there before the men he had persecuted. "I got no excuses to make for what I've done. I had a big investment at stake and, selfishly, I meant to save it no matter at what cost to others. Even to bringin' in a mad dog to fight for me, one that I couldn't control once I'd turned him loose!"

"I threw in with Tug Downing," young Welsh said heavily. "It was the same thing."

"Well," Calder continued, "the war is over, and I'm licked. The Legislature has ruled that the fence will have to come down. The Sundust belongs now to you free grass men."

The small-tally leader shook his head. "We've both lost, Calder," he said. "The hoemen have come, with their families and their plows. It's them that have won this war. They'll build their own fences, and plow up the bunchgrass. Cattle is through!" His tone was bitter.

Jim Hatfield spoke then.

"Not quite so fast, Kid! The open range is thrcugh, yes, and with it the days when a cowman could run ten thousand head of scrub cattle and make his profit from mere quantity, even when the meat

wasn't so good. Hereafter you'll have to concentrate on quality, on breeding up your stock, so that you can make your profit from a herd small enough to run on your own land, behind your own fence. That kind of meat requires grain feed, and when the farmers get to operating you'll be able to buy it from them. Cheap, too, because it'll mean a handy market for 'em. You can all help each other, and dovetail your interests to make the Sundust a place of prosperity it's never been before!"

The men looked at one another, under the persuasive power of the picture he drew for them.

"But how about water?" somebody said dubiously. "A drought started this trouble."

"You've got plenty of water," said Hatfield. "Dakins is going to hit a flow one of these days with his well drill—he can't miss. What's more, I've got it figured that it wouldn't cost too much to build a check dam on the river, put out laterals, and irrigate. Working together, there's no reason you can't help each other lick any dry year that ever comes to the Sundust!"

Kid Welsh ran a palm down his blunt jaw, frowning.

"I dunno," he muttered finally. "You make it all sound good. You make it sound like it was the dumbest thing anybody ever did, for us to keep this war going. But it's going to take money to manage these things, to build a heavy beef herd. And that's what none of us small fry has much of, any more. We got nothin' but some starved-out critters that ain't worth much above the glue they'll make."

"I got more blooded stock under my brand," said Calder quickly, "than I'll have any space to run now. I think we can make a deal to stock your places with starter herds. As for payin' for 'em—" He shrugged. "You got a bill against the Triple C for the things I let Massey do to you."

HATFIELD took a hand then.

"This is enough palavering," he said. "You can settle the details later. Some of us have got bullet-holes that need tendin' to—like the Kid, there. Sally Alverson wanted to work on that hurt leg of his before we left the wagon train. She'll start worrying if we don't get him back to her pretty quick!"

Suddenly somebody laughed, and others joined in, joshing the Kid. It was fine, whole-hearted laughter—laughter that hadn't been heard on the Sundust in many troubled months. It held the release of emotions that had been too long involved in heartache and sudden death. Even the Kid grinned, self-consciously.

"Aww!" he said. "Lay off, will you?"

And Jim Hatfield, smiling to himself, knew the satisfaction of a job well done. These folks could settle the rest of their problems now, and maybe in time Sally would even be able to tame some of the embittered wildness out of this Welsh youngster, give him something in life to compensate for the home and family the war had cost him.

Meanwhile, the Lone Wolf figured he had better be getting in touch again, as soon as possible, with his boss at Ranger headquarters. His work here was finished. Bill McDowell would likely be having another assignment ready for him, by now.

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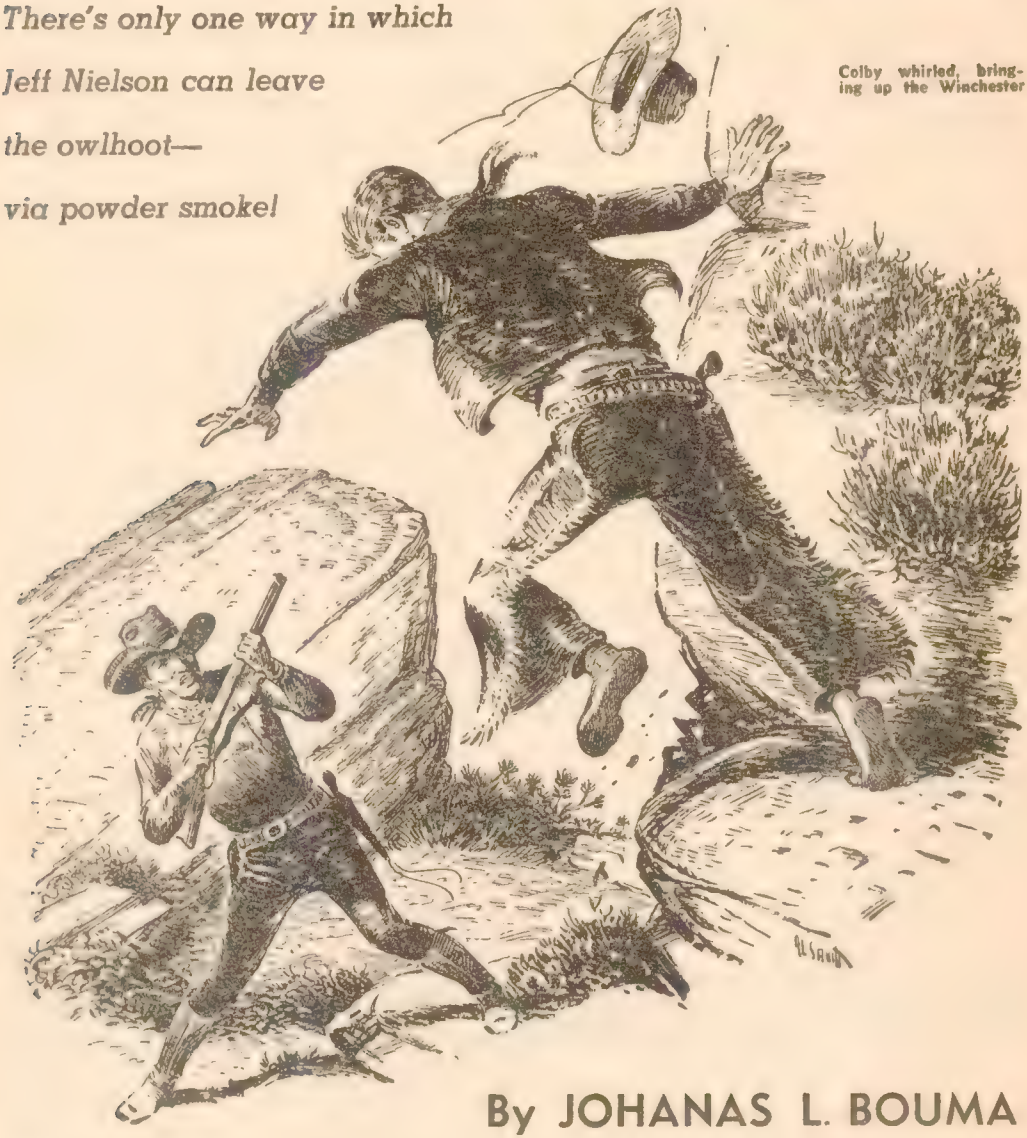

Colby whirled, bringing up the Winchester

By JOHANAS L. BOUMA

SHADOWS unfolded like dark cloth across the valley, but the ridges caught a last crimson fire from the lowering sun, and they could see the ribbon of yellow road where the stage carrying the payroll to the Tulip Mine would cut through the pass in the morning.

"Tulip hired twenty extra men last month," Pete Colby turned toward the ranchhouse. "We'll make a killing."

Clay Barton followed Colby into the house. Jeff Neilson looked toward the pass

a moment longer, his thoughts troubled. He rolled a smoke, finding no pleasure in the evening. Presently Colby appeared framed the doorway and called, "You coming, kid?" He threw his own cigarette from him and went inside.

Pushing the lamp to a corner of the table, Colby unfolded the map. His forefinger traced the road. "About a quarter mile after she enters the pass comes the first turn. There's plenty of cover on both sides. The stage slows to a walk at the turn."

Colby went on with his explanation. He was a slender man, scarcely thirty, handsome in a dark way, and his black wool shirt matched his clipped mustache. His eyes were sharp and Jeff was conscious of the quick greed that edged his voice.

Clay Barton said, "Sure she'll be carryin' the payroll?"

Colby grinned suddenly. "Jeff got it straight from the horse's mouth. Right, kid?"

A quick unrest prickled beneath Jeff's skin. He nodded, not liking this. "Miller mentioned it when I was at his place last night."

"Miller driving the stage?"

"It's Sullivan's run. Peters'll be riding guard. If Jim Miller was driving, we wouldn't pull this job."

Clay Barton was thick-chested as a grizzle. His face was broad and dark with beard stubble, his eyes close-set, black. He spoke with sly malice. "Thinkin' about his daughter, kid?"

"My business," Jeff snapped. "I'm just telling you this job would be out if Miller was driving."

Pete Colby gave him a close look. "Even with him out of it, you don't like this, eh?"

Jeff made an impatient gesture. He was a lean youngster with a restless, sun-darkened face. "It's too close to home. Means a man gets to robbing his neighbors."

HE SAW Colby's face grow tight in the lamplight. "Let's get something straight. Two months ago you drifted in here without a dollar to your name. When I called the shots, you didn't squawk. We pulled one job. Now you want out, is that it?"

Jeff said nothing, feeling sick inside. He had no argument against Colby, having walked into this with his eyes open. But he'd remembered how he had drifted around, half starved most of the time. It had been a bad year, jobs were scarce, and this easy excuse had pushed his conscience aside.

"Let me remind you again, kid," Colby said. "I run a few cows. You and Barton ride for me. As far as the town's concerned I'm a respectable rancher. Don't worry about Frank Tulip being a neighbor. He can afford to lose a few thousand. He's got his ranch. He runs the bank. He owns a mine. Me, I don't figure to run cows the rest of my life. And after this job you won't have to worry for a long time about riding herd for forty a month and found."

Barton said, "Walk easy, kid. Keep your ears open and your mouth shut unless you want your neck stretched."

Quick rage stiffened Jeff, made his voice hoarse. "You're too free and easy with your own mouth to suit me. And if you don't ease up on your gun hand, we'll be in real trouble. You had no call to shoot that guard last week. What if he dies?"

"Cut this out!" Colby said sharply. "There's no need for all this. That holdup took place in River Bend county. Nobody's pointing a finger at us."

"If there's any pointin' it'll be with shootin' irons," Barton growled. His eyes were suddenly hot and smoky. "You get what I mean, kid?"

"I said enough." Colby slapped the table. "You ride into town, Jeff. Nose around. Might mention that we're planning to comb the hills for strays in the morning."

Jeff rode the six miles to town at a steady pace, telling himself there was no cause for worry. They would pull this off without any trouble. But with the thought he knew that being a spook had never set right with him. There were men who could live that life and not be bothered —men like Barton who had their streak of cruelty. The goodness of life was not in them. And there was Pete Colby with a greed more powerful than his conscience. Colby would kill to satisfy that greed.

JEFF topped a rise and saw the lights of Cactus wink below. He remem-

bered riding in that first time, bone-weary from traveling and without the price of a meal in his pocket. He'd come down the dusty street at a walk, past the houses with the picket fences all around, the shady trees. At the third house from the outskirts of town a man had straightened from a flower bed at his approach; a middle-aged man with a round, beaming face and a walrus mustache. Behind him was the white cottage, with roses climbing the lattice work to the roof. Jeff had stopped his horse, leaning wearily across his saddle to ask his questions.

The man had introduced himself. Jim Miller, he'd said, drove the stage from Cactus to River Bend. No, he didn't know of any ranchers hiring just now, but Jeff might ride out and talk to Pete Colby. Colby had just bought the old Kettner place, and it might be he could use a man.

Jeff had spoken his thanks and was turning his mount when the girl called from the porch. Her hair was brown and fell to her shoulders, and the smile on her face was sweeter and more lovely than the roses. He had sat there, awkward and self-conscious in his dust-streaked clothes. She had asked, out of pure friendliness, if he wouldn't step down for a cold glass of lemonade. Afterwards, riding on to Colby's place, he had a picture of Nancy Miller in his heart, and he had forgotten his weariness.

Now, remembering these things, he wanted to grasp them, to hold them. He wanted to walk through this town, his own man, to speak to his friends openly and without shame. It was a hard thing to face people when you lived a lie.

He hitched his horse at the rail fronting the Cactus saloon and saw Sheriff Adams in deep talk with a tall, erect man. He nodded a greeting and, passing, caught the glint of a star on the tall man's vest. Something tightened around his heart. He went through the swinging doors with the feeling of a marked man; he ordered a drink, and when the bottle was set in front of him he said casually, "New deputy?" and nodded at the door.

"That's Murphy with Adams," the barkeep said. "Sheriff of River Bend. Had some trouble there a week ago. Bandits held up a stage. Shot a guard."

The band around Jeff's heart snapped tight. "Kill him?"

"The guard pulled through." The barkeep moved away.

The pressure eased out of Jeff. He finished his drink and walked along the board walk toward the outskirts of town. From the darkness of a porch a voice said, "Good evening, Jeff," and he recognized Sullivan. He made a reply and walked on with his head lowered, thinking bitterly that in the morning he would confront this man with a gun and a handkerchief across his face.

"Why, Jeff, did you forget where we live?" said a girl's voice.

He swung back, knowing how deep he had been in his thoughts to have passed Miller's place. Nancy was standing inside the gate. He knew she had been waiting for him, and he said lamely, "Riding herd in my sleep, I guess."

"Come in, Jeff. There's lemonade."

He followed her up the walk. "We'll drink it on the porch," she said. "It's nice out." She came back with tall glasses on a tray and settled on the steps. "We'll have to talk softly. Pop's getting his sleep."

"Kind of early for bed."

"He's getting up early. He's making the run in the morning."

The band came back around Jeff's heart. "Thought he mentioned Sullivan taking it."

"I don't know. Something came up, I guess. Pop's driving."

Behind them the door opened and Jim Miller's mild voice said, "Couldn't sleep. Evening, son."

The shaft of light coming from the front room touched Miller, and it seemed to Jeff that a steel lining had settled beneath the pleasant face. Miller settled in a chair and sighed heavily. "Colby keeping you busy?"

"Looking for strays. Be combing the hills in the morning." He got up and moved down the steps. "Guess I'll be riding."

"I'll walk in with you," Miller said.

NANCY walked with him to the gate. She murmured, "Will you be at the dance Saturday night?"

"I'll be by for you."

It wasn't something he had meant to say, but now he wasn't sorry. It raised the hope that by Saturday this would all

be behind him. He knew now what he had to do. He would ride back and tell Colby the holdup was off and that he was through. In the morning he'd look around for something else. Maybe it wasn't too late to make a clean start.

Miller joined him and they walked slowly along the street. Miller said, "Strays in the hills? Thought Colby had all his cows in the lower meadow?"

Jeff wondered how Miller would know this. "Reckon a few scattered," he said.

Up ahead the door of the sheriff's office stood open; he saw Sheriff Adams and the River Bend man talking to Sullivan and Peters, the stage guard. They became silent was Miller and Jeff approached. Miller slapped Jeff on the shoulder, saying, "Keep your eyes open, son," and turned to join the four men.

Jeff moved on. He mounted his horse and rode out of town with the sudden feeling of movement closing in on him. Confused thoughts tumbled through his head. He kicked his mount into a run, only slacking when he saw the yellow blur of light from the ranchhouse. He left his horse at the corral and strode across the yard.

Colby was waiting on the porch, a stogie between his teeth. "What'd you find, kid?" he asked.

Jeff passed him into the house. Barton was cleaning his gun; he stood up and let it slide in the holster Colby pushed the door shut with his back. "Spill it, kid," he snapped.

"Miller's taking the stage through. And the River Bend sheriff is in town."

Barton made a quick sliding move to the door. He stepped outside and stood silent for a long moment before coming back in. "You hear about that guard?"

Something in Barton's voice startled Jeff, something he had never expected to hear there. It was pure fear. He said, "Your yellow streak is showing, Barton. Time for you to run." To Colby he said flatly, "I'm through, Pete. I was a fool and I've got the straight of it at last."

Colby said softly, "You running, kid?"

"Not running—walking, and telling you."

He strode to his room, hearing a door slam. He packed his things in the battered valise and carried it into the living room. Colby was alone, counting currency out of a tin box. "Your cut on our lone job, kid. Get away from this town before you start spending it."

"I don't want it," Jeff said heavily. He was suddenly thinking that he had come here with nothing, that he was leaving the same way. And yet the two short months had given him a past that would be hard to live down.

"Don't be a fool," Colby said, but Jeff pushed out the door and mounted his horse. He took the trail to town, and then, suddenly, a warning went through him —Barton slamming out of the house!

He pulled his horse to a walk to think this out. Ahead the trail dipped, then rose abruptly to a rise. A man would be outlined on that rise. At the bottom of the grade he dismounted, palmed his gun and clambered up the steep part. There was a clump of poplars where the trail leveled.

He reached this protection and called out, "You looking for me, Barton?" and flung himself to one side, seeing the tiny lick of flame not ten yards away. He snapped a shot there before the echo of the report had rolled away, then lunged forward and crawled into the thick of the trees.

There sounded a rustle to one side. He lay perfectly still, hearing movement, the hoarse rasp of Barton's breathing. He moved a little to one side and heard Barton say, "I'll shut your mouth for keeps," and the tiny flame lashed out again and the bullet whacked into the tree beside his head.

HE HAD his arm straight out. He fired at the flash and when he heard Barton's agonized grunt he knew it had been a hit. He moved forward on hands and knees. Then the thunder of a shot lifted in front of him, and a hammer blow slammed against his shoulder and drove him to the ground. He rolled over, firing again. There was no reply to this shot and he crawled forward and found Barton with glazed eyes, staring at the sky.

Jeff stood straight, swaying a little. He could feel hot blood pumping down his side. He moved slowly toward the house. He was below the porch, facing the light, when he heard Colby's cautious voice. "Get him, Clay?"

Jeff raised his gun arm with a tremen-

dous effort. When he reached the door his knees buckled. His shirt front was soaked a deep red. He lurched through the door, dropping his gun, seeing Colby as a blurred shadow at the end of the room. He heard Colby say, "So it was a push, eh, kid?" and then Colby laughed. "That leaves me holding the sack, and it's filled with money!"

He swayed toward the voice. And then suddenly a dark wave broke over him and smashed him to the floor . . .

He came back to consciousness with a vague certainty that several hours had passed. He rolled across the floor with a deadly panic that he was dying. The dull, throbbing pain hit him, and he was aware that his wound had burst open again. A knifing sickness brought him to his feet. He stumbled forward and leaned weakly against the table. Through the window now he could see the heavy gray of early dawn, and it came to him suddenly that Colby had left him for dead.

Instinct called from deep within him, and it was this, and not will that moved him across the room to where he knew Colby kept his stogies. There was a bottle there in the cupboard. He wrenched out the cork with his teeth and felt the fiery liquor against the back of his throat. The stuff cleared his head. He broke one of the stogies apart, soaked the tobacco in the whiskey and ripped his shirt from around the wound. The bullet had entered below the collarbone. There was a mushy swelling at the back of his shoulder and he knew it to be a clean wound.

He took another pull at the bottle. He bit hard on the cork and forced the whisky-soaked tobacco into the wound. He wrapped it the best he could with a dish towel, made a sling of his neck scarf and prepared to ride.

He picked up his gun on the way, putting in fresh loads with one clumsy hand. When he stumbled outside he found that his horse had wandered to the corral. He mounted painfully, only finding the stirrups long after his horse was in motion. He pointed toward the distant pass and slouched deep in the saddle for the long ride.

Once, when he saw the ridges close in on him, and that the yellow fingers of an early sun were marking the east, he wondered if he might be wrong. And then he remembered Colby's greed, and he knew that the same instinct that was taking him to the pass would lead Colby to hold up the stage—for all of Colby's instincts would be centered on his craving for that payroll.

The ridges seemed shot with leaping flames. In between the hollow and canyons were wedges of shadow. Jeff circled wide of the road, heading up a narrow canyon adjoining the pass. He estimated the time at six; the stage should enter the pass at seven.

The canyon flared out sharply. He angled his horse up the steep side and zigzagged to the top where he dismounted. He walked at a low crouch to the ridge. Below him now, on this far side, he had a full sweep of the pass and the winding road. He saw the first turn, a scattering of boulders. He gazed for a long time before catching the glimpse of a horse tied high in the brush. When he did, he was not surprised.

Taking advantage of every bush and rock, he descended slowly. Halfway down, he paused for a last look across the valley, seeing a tiny dust boil approaching the pass, knowing that this was the stage. He hurried then, feeling certain that Colby would make his shots on Miller and Peters before showing himself.

WHEN he neared the bottom of the pass, he still hadn't spotted Colby. He was even with the turn now, and the fast approaching dust cloud marked the stage. He slid behind a huge boulder and peered around. The road was directly below. He scanned the surrounding brush and rocks carefully. At any moment the stage would be coming around the turn.

He heard a small movement, and then, below and slightly to his right, he saw the barrel of a gun move across a rock to line up the road. He removed his boots quickly and crept silently forward. There was the sound of hoofs, the creaking of leather and wood, and he took the last few yards at a jump and saw Colby flat behind the rock.

But it was not a complete surprise. As Jeff took the jump, a rock lizard made small noise across the dry brush leaves. Colby whirled like a cat, bringing the Winchester around with him. Jeff lunged to one side as the shot rang out. He had a picture of the road, the stage jarring to a

halt in a cloud of dust, and then his feet slipped from under him and he tumbled headlong down the slope. He ground the agony of sudden pain between his teeth. He twisted over on his back, feet raised, and he thumbed a quick shot at Colby. He saw Colby slam back against the boulder, the Winchester grasped in both hands as he tried to swing it around. Jeff fired again.

Colby's body jerked.

A red smear appeared across his chest. His knees buckled slowly and he fell face down.

There was a sound of scrambling feet. Jeff tried to raise himself and felt the weakness come over him. The landscape blurred and he scarcely recognized Jim Miller bending over him.

"Colby's got the loot of that River Bend job," Jeff said weakly. "Barton's up at the ranchhouse. He's dead."

MILLER raised him and held a canteen to his lips.

He said, "Turn the stage, Peters. Tulip can wait with his payroll. We're taking this boy to town."

A sharp voice said:

"This one of 'em?"

Jeff opened his eyes and looked at the River Bend sheriff. Sheriff Adams stood at his side. Miller said painfully, "He was—"

Jeff touched his arm. "Let's clean this up, Jim," he whispered. He looked at the two sheriffs. "I was on that River Bend job. My only one."

Peters ran up. "Got 'er turned, Jim. Say, there's a tin box full of money on Colby's horse."

Miller helped Jeff to his feet. They hobbled to the stage. When he was inside, Miller turned to the sheriffs. He said, "You got your money, Murphy. You want the boy too?"

"The law is the law," Murphy said shortly.

"Already got two to bury," Adams said. "This one is a good boy. Leave him with us. I'll be responsible."

"Three in on it," Murphy insisted. "When you called in your suspicions of Colby, you said the same thing. Colby wasn't doing enough ranching to hire two men. And then about them taking the long way around to River Bend last week. You figured to trap them by Miller telling the boy the payroll would be on this stage. Okay. So we got 'em."

"Jeff got 'em." Miller said sharply. "If it hadn't been for him—well, maybe you'd be flat in the road with a bullet in your carcass."

Murphy said, "Reckon you're right. But I got a report to make out."

"We'll figure it out over a drink," Adams said.

They climbed on the high seat with Peters. Miller came inside with Jeff and asked:

"You heard?"

Jeff nodded.

"I heard."

"Reckon you've balanced the ledger, son." He chuckled. "All your part of the blame ran out with your blood."

Jeff grinned.

"Jim, you tell Nancy I feel bad about not taking her to that dance Saturday night. You tell her—"

"I'm taking you to my place," Miller said drily. "Reckon Nancy'll want to do the nursing. You tell her yourself."

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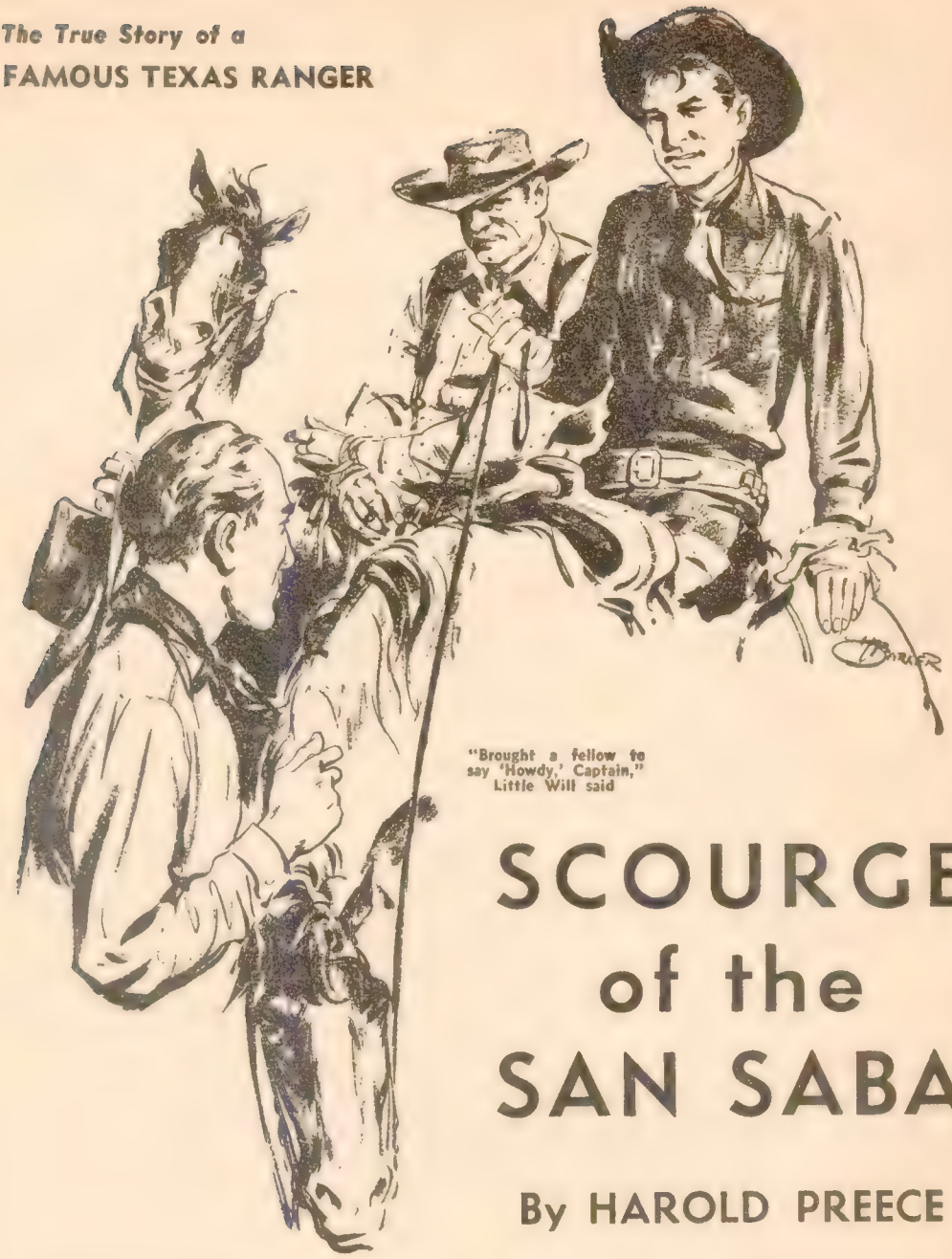

"Brought a fellow to say 'Howdy,' Captain," Little Will said

SCOURGE of the SAN SABA

By HAROLD PREECE

Little Will Preece, youngest of his Ranger company, goes on the trail of gun-runners and renegades!

RANGER Captain John H. Connor wasn't looking for more trouble or more raw recruits, that sizzling summer morning of 1857.

He held trouble right in his hands, and that trouble took the shape of the latest

dispatch from Governor Elisha M. Pease in Austin. The message scorched the captain's soul worse than the blazing Texas sun turning the brackish waters of the San Saba River into clouds of soaring steam.

Bluntly, Governor Pease wished to be informed why Captain Connor's company had not crushed the marauding Comanches in those two tomahawk-scarred counties of Brown and San Saba.

"Is it," the Governor inquired acidly, "because you enlist in your force striplings just weaned from their mothers instead of seasoned men used to frontier warfare?"

The captain spat hard on the dry ground that had been watered only by the blood of Texas settlers, these six months since he'd set out to protect the people of this region. He was dimly aware of the two men who had ridden up and sat in their saddles, waiting for him to finish reading the communique.

One of the pair was young and slim. His lean, dark face was evidence that there was Indian blood in his veins.

The older man was broad, middle-aged and shaggy. Some squaw man married to a woman of the peaceful tribes, Captain Connor guessed, and their half-breed son who'd eventually "go Injun."

"All right!" he bawled at them. "Name it! Some Comanche stole a couple of your razorback shoats. And if I don't tear down a couple of mountains rounding him up in a couple of hours, you'll write to the Governor—"

New Recruit

The captain's jaw dropped. His tongue froze, even as the sweat poured down his face. He hadn't noticed that the lad's left hand was bandaged in a crude tourniquet—or that the hands of the big man were bound tight with a span of rope to his saddle horn.

The lad's coal-black eyes were twinkling as they measured the Ranger commander standing there petrified.

"Morning, Captain," he drawled. "Lit out from Travis County, three days ago, to visit my brother, Dick Preece, who's riding with you. Brought another feller to come along and say howdy, too." He jerked his thumb toward the sullen older man. "Took a little persuading but here he is, Captain Connor—Mr. Cat Cartwright."

The name hit the captain with the quick, hard impact of mountain rock. He'd scoured Texas for Cat Cartwright, the renegade, who kept the Comanche invasion going by peddling guns to the blood-crazed warriors. But this downy-cheeked stripling who'd never worn a badge had shot it out with the desperado, then brought him in set for the gallows.

The captain's face broke into a huge smile. "Little Will Preece—Uncle Will Preece's son from Bull Creek," he said softly. "Dick's always swearing you're the out-shootinest kid in Texas. That doctor we got'll fix up that bad hand. Before you light down, raise up your good one and repeat what I say."

Before the sun had crawled an inch higher in the stewing cauldron of the skies Little Will Preece had joined his brother in the Texas Rangers.

Not that hard riding and hard shooting were exactly strangers to the boy who was one of the youngest men ever signed up in the world's greatest body of light cavalry fighters. Little Will had barely shed his milk teeth before he was galloping behind his dad in the hill country posses that tracked down roving bands of Comanche and Kiowa horse thieves.

Uncle Will Preece had shown his liking for good Indians by marrying a half-Cherokee woman back in Kentucky before drifting down to Texas with his ever-increasing family. He'd shown his dislike of bad Indians by drilling every warrior of the wild tribes who dared poke a lasso around his corral.

Further back, the Preeces were kinsmen of Daniel Boone and of a lanky young fellow just beginning to make a name for himself—Abraham Lincoln. Uncle Will had named the first of his sons born in Texas for himself. The nickname, "Little Will," was simply the mountain folks' way of describing William Martin Preece, Jr.

Captain Connor knew that he was in for more trouble when the Governor heard that he'd enrolled a boy at least a year younger than the minimum enlistment age of eighteen. He hoped, however, that the distinguished record already made by Ranger Dick Preece would temper

the Governor's ire about Little Will.

"Meanwhile, Will," he suggested, "Why don't you look after the hosses and stay out of shooting fights till I can break it to His Excellency easy-like."

The black eyes blazed. "Didn't sign up to be a stable boy, Captain Connor," Little Will answered. "I took all the risks when I took the oath. And I'm ready for the risks." He dug the heel of his cowhide boot sharply in the sand. "I'm thinking we'll do better to break up the rest of the gun peddling gangs than trying to please a man who squats in an office never hearing an arrow whizz past his head."

The captain nodded in quick agreement. The Governor could sit in his comfortable mansion in Austin and write scornful letters to the men guarding the long Texas frontier against savagery. But none knew better than the grizzled Ranger commander that these gloomy hills were full of lawless characters who cared nothing for the scalps of their fellow-whites. Behind every Comanche raid lurked the crafty renegades who kept Indians supplied with whiskey and Indian war pouches filled with lead.

Special Mission

To the stripling fell one of the toughest detective jobs ever handed any of the lynx-eyed men of the Texas Rangers. Little Will got the assignment because he'd already brought in Cat Cartwright, the most notorious of the illegal gun-runners. Now, he was ordered to prowl the country lone-handed and get the names of the rest.

Quietly the lean youngster rode from one town to the other, keeping his eyes open and his ears cocked. Nobody paid much attention to him. The West was full of stray range kids who'd cut apron strings only to tie themselves to saddle strings.

He talked little as he stopped in pioneer cabins for a bed and a bite of grub. For two weeks he learned nothing. Then a fearful settler let slip that suspicious characters congregated at a general store located in a straggling hamlet on a bend of the river.

The young Ranger recalled that this was the one community on the San Saba never raided by Comanches. He spurred his horse into a long lope and headed for the settlement.

There, the evil-faced storekeeper hired the stray kid at a dollar a week to sweep the floor and do odd jobs. In two days' time, Little Will thought he knew why the Comanches never visited that settlement.

The storekeeper's main sidekick was a burly, black-bearded giant called Dink Hudgins. Little Will, sleeping in the loft of the store, woke up the second night when he heard the clatter of wagons outside. In the pale Texas moonlight he saw Hudgins and a crew of nondescripts loading the wagons with huge, heavy boxes from a side door.

But he found no more than a normal supply of firearms, kept for sale to settlers, when he stole down into the storage room of the place. "If those were boxes of guns," he decided, "they don't let 'em lie around long."

On the third day he saw Hudgins and the storekeeper whispering to each other and nodding toward him. His heart contracted for a split second. Had the pair learned his real identity through their extensive grapevine branching throughout the Comanche-infested country?

He felt relieved and bent himself industriously to his broom, keeping his ears open, when he heard the storekeeper speak.

"Looks like he's half-redskin," the storekeeper said.

Hudgins beckoned to the boy. "What tribe you get separated from, sonny?" he demanded.

Little Will thought fast. If he admitted his Cherokee blood, those two desperados would cut his throat quicker than they'd gut a squirrel. For the civilized industrious folk of his mother hated the Comanche tomahawks. And the Comanches loathed the Cherokees, considering them renegade Indians.

"My ma was part Kiowa," he answered. "I don't know much about it, and I don't wanta say nothing about it around here. There's a lot of Kiowas among them Comanches."

The burly Hudgins slapped him hard on the shoulder. "You're gonna meet some of your ma's kinfolks tonight, son!" he roared. "I'm short a teamster that got picked off by them cussed Rangers. Reck-

on you'd like to help out your own flesh and blood." He winked at the storekeeper, and the pair laughed loud.

Little Will's stoic face did not reveal what he was thinking during the hour that followed. He guessed that the Comanches and Kiowas would assemble to buy the guns in a deep canyon that was the main hideout of the riding bands. The canyon was ten miles away in one direction, the Ranger camp twenty miles in the other. His comrades would have to be notified of the illicit council. Then they'd have to ride thirty rocky miles to round up the gun-runners and their customers at the appointed rendezvous.

Messenger Needed

But how was he to get word to his company? If he did not contact them, the red war parties would be equipped by the ring to let loose a new wave of death and destruction on the defenseless white settlements.

He wasn't a praying man even if his dad was a Methodist elder. Maybe, it was the pagan influence of his Cherokee mother which made him feel that a young fellow had to do his share of sparking and shooting before he settled down to religion. But, that minute, he was praying in whispers—praying in fluent hill country English and in the dozen words of Cherokee he'd got from Ma Preece.

Little Will changed his mind about religion when the answer to his prayer walked in. He knew the hungry-looking, black-garbed stranger who opened the door to be one of the itinerant ministers called circuit riders.

Luckily, the storekeeper was out and Little Will had to fill the preacher's order. Unluckily, the preacher recognized him.

"Little Will Preece!" the parson blurted. "Baptized you when you was a baby. Thought you were off with the Texas Range—"

Little Will's hand shot out and cupped itself around the old circuit rider's mouth before it could finish the word.

"Ride, Parson, ride!" he hissed. "Ride to the Ranger camp on Little Cow Crossin'! Tell 'em the Injuns'll gather at Willow Canyon, tonight, to buy guns. The settlements'll be wiped out unless they get there."

The preacher's face turned white. Then he dashed out the store and jumped into his saddle. Little Will heard his horses' hoofs thundering toward the Ranger headquarters at Little Cow Crossing.

Tom-toms throbbed, torches flared, that night at the Kiowa-Comanche encampment in Willow Canyon. Groups of drunken braves moved from demijohn to demijohn of the raw whiskey furnished free by the gun-runners to brisk up business. The drunker the Indians got, the dearer they paid for the instruments of death that evil white men put in their hands.

Little Will stood between Hudgins and the storekeeper in the front of the loaded wagon. Hudgins would hold up a weapon, the storekeeper would name the price in the Indian tongue, and Little Will would hand the gun down to the buyer. The stripling saw that the pair dealt as treacherously with redmen as with whites. Ten fine buffalo hides were collected for a rusty carbine; six good beaver skins paid for two boxes of cartridges that would have cost less than a dollar at any country store in Texas.

Little Will's ears, sharp as an Indian's, strained for the sound of distant hoofbeats above the bedlam of buying and selling. His hands were steady as he passed out guns to leering, reeling braves. But he was worrying—worrying for fear that the old preacher had been waylaid by prowling Comanche scouts before he could reach the Ranger camp.

Then his hands started shaking for the only time in his life when he sensed the stealthy movement of men descending the canyon walls. The Indians had dug steep pathways down the sides of the big hole in the earth. But tonight the customary guards of the paths had left their posts to drink and barter.

Then his ears heard above the din another cry of another breed. He heard the battle cry of the Texas Rangers, and his heart leaped to it.

The Rangers Arrive

Tall, big-hatted Texans were swarming into the camp. Their first roaring barrage of shots punctured the demijohns and the fire-water gushed out on the ground. The second fusillade felled a

dozen warriors. The confused, milling braves, taken by surprise, too drunk to put up an adequate defense, screamed in terror and charged in a howling rout toward the opposite end of the canyon.

There, they were halted by other Indians they regarded as renegades. Tonkawas and Lipans hidden in the bushes leaped up and sprang toward them. Then Little Will knew that the preacher had ridden to still another camp besides that of the Rangers. But he didn't know till after the battle that the old circuit rider had attached himself as a missionary to these two friendly tribes, and they obeyed him because they regarded him as the messenger of the Great Spirit.

Little Will himself rounded up Hudgins and the storekeeper. He stuck their own guns into their sides and marched them into the same stockade that the Comanches and Kiowas had built for white prisoners. There they stayed with the captive red warriors till they were taken to Austin by a Ranger squad for trial and hanging.

The warriors were later transported under U. S. Army guard back to the reservation they'd fled in Indian Territory. But before they left, the old chief of the war band sought out Little Will.

"You brave warrior," he said earnestly. "You come back with me to reservation. Me marry you to nice Comanche girl, and you be my son."

That touched Little Will. He had to turn down the old sagamore's invitation. It made him realize though that wild Indians who admired courageous enemies couldn't be just naturally bad.

The Comanches and Kiowas were terrible fighters because they were terribly scared. They were scared of the advancing white civilization threatening the ancient ways of their fathers. But his mother's people, the Cherokees, had also been scared Indians who fought out of fear till they learned the new ways.

If the Cherokees had not learned, he might have been fighting with the conquered instead of the conquerors. Ever after, that thought made him feel kinder toward those tribes that fearfully, often cruelly, but somehow bravely, fought for the old ways.

Ranger Detective

He gave the chief a handful of store bought cigars as a parting gift. Many months went by before other Comanche bands visited that big stretch of Texas along the San Saba River. When they did come, they stayed only briefly. For Little Will, meanwhile, had uncovered the main source of their forbidden arms.

After the battle of Willow Canyon, he'd carefully noted down the serial numbers of the guns seized from the ring. Then he started tracing those numbers to places that might have sold them. His method is elemental detective work nowadays. But it was something new and startling in Old Texas.

He rode a thousand miles. He checked every place that sold shooting equipment from the Red River to the Rio Grande. Finally, he traced the whole batch of contraband arms to a certain gunsmith in San Antonio. Then he saw to it that this king of the Texas gun runners went up to hard labor for life.

Little Will served with Captain Connor until the company was abolished in a political squabble between the Ranger commander and the Governor during the early part of 1859. But in a little more than a year of service, the downy-cheeked youth had made one of the greatest Ranger reputations of all time.

(Concluded on page 97)

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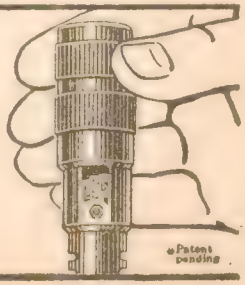

*Patent pending

The gaunt outlaw meets a damsel in distress, robbery, murder and dope-running in Sugar Creek Valley!

LONG SAM Makes a Stake

By LEE BOND

NOT until his horse stopped under him, did Long Sam Littlejohn realize that he had been sleeping in the saddle. He snapped erect, bony hands streaking to the black butts of matched six-shooters that were holstered low on his thighs.

He sat there for a moment, aching and numb, a gaunt, unusually tall man whose jet-black clothing showed the dust of long, hard trails. Long Sam's smoky eyes were so bloodshot they matched the color of the rising Texas sun, and he seemed to have trouble focusing them on the four-wire gate that had stopped his horse.

"Gate," he muttered. "Who's been fencin' this ridge?"

He broke off. He was not on the big ridge Sleeper, the leg-weary old roan under him, had been following. He was

down in a narrow valley, with pine clad slopes lifting away on either side. New alertness tingled through Long Sam, and suddenly he hipped around in the hand-tooled black saddle upon which he sat, bloodshot eyes raking the old road down which Sleeper had undoubtedly come.

Outlawed, with a sizable cash reward offered for his dead-or-alive capture, getting careless about blundering out into open roads was a dangerous thing for Long Sam to do. But it was a doubly dangerous thing to have done in this instance, for somewhere on his back trail Joe Fry, a deputy U. S. marshal who worked out of Austin, was pounding the grit, trying to overtake him!

"Judas, Sleeper!" the outlaw croaked, facing forward again. "It ain't like you to quit a course, even if I did fall asleep. This valley looks familiar, but I don't see—Well, I'll be double-dogged!"

Long Sam's voice ended on a note of pleased discovery. His roving eyes had found a deep, V-shaped notch in the timbered ridge on his left.

"Yankee Pass!" he chuckled wearily. "Which means that this is Sugar Creek valley we're in. Sleeper, you were headin' for the Boxed O, where we sure were welcome as long as little old Bob Ogden was alive!"

Long Sam sighed wearily, slid out of the saddle, and got the gate open. He lead his mount through, closed the gate, then sent another uneasy glance back along the road. He swung back to the saddle and went down the road at a slow jog.

Gray cat-squirrels and the bigger, plumper red ones sassed him from the timber. There were plenty of fresh deer tracks in the sandy road, and off on a slope Long Sam heard a turkey hen calling.

"Game galore, and me wolf-hungry!" the outlaw muttered. "But I dassent stop."

LONG SAM glanced around the valley down which he rode, memories marching through his fatigue-numbed mind. Peppery little old Bob Ogden had hewn his Boxed O cattle empire out of these hills, and spread it on to the towering walls of *tornillo* and pear and mesquite that lay beyond, along the Rio Grande.

Ogden had hung onto his ranch during the struggle between the states, and had managed somehow to keep the power-drunk carpetbaggers and the hand-picked criminals they had installed as state police from ousting him. Outlawed because he had used his guns on some of those brigands the carpetbaggers brazenly called police, Long Sam Littlejohn had always been welcome at Bob Ogden's Boxed O.

But those days were past, the tall outlaw ruminated regretfully. Little old Bob Ogden had passed away, six years ago, leaving the empire he had built to Zella, his daughter and only child. Motherless since she was just toddling, Zella had grown up to be somewhat tomboyish, more than a little headstrong, and unquestionably one of the most beautiful young women in the whole country.

Zella had always looked upon Long Sam as a trusted friend, yet they had come to loggerheads, four years ago, when the girl fell in love with a loudmouthed spur-jingler named Pete Willard. Zella had asked Long Sam's advice when she decided to marry Pete, then had given him a raking when he told her honestly that Pete Willard was more interested in her money and cattle and the huge Boxed O ranch than he was in her.

"Maybe I needed a clawin' for the things I said about Pete Willard," Long Sam remarked aloud. "Anyhow, I hear Pete has done all right by himself, gettin' elected to sheriff."

Long Sam broke off abruptly. He had come to a point where the road forked, one branch of it swinging to the right, the other turning left. The right hand fork of the road would take him down to the valley's mouth, where the huge Boxed O ranchhouse was located. The left hand fork would take Long Sam to Caney Bluff, the county seat. Sam grimaced ruefully, and swung Sleeper into the left-hand fork.

"If it was still dark when you quit that big ridge, maybe you fooled Joe Fry, Sleeper!" the outlaw said. "But that moon was so bright he'd been followin' us by sight, all night, so likely the little devil will be comin'—"

Long Sam's voice pinched off. From somewhere along the winding old road ahead of him, a shot smashed out. He

gigged Sleeper off the road and into a thick stand of moss-draped oaks, heading for a pine-clad slope across the creek bottom. Other shots roared out now, and Long Sam pushed his weary horse a little more.

Long Sam now saw the maw of a dark ravine as he approached the slope, whirling suddenly into the gulch when he heard hoofs on the road he had just left. The outlaw groaned in dismay and swung his horse quickly around when he saw that he had ridden into a brush-choked pocket that ended at sheer stone bluffs. But before he could ride out of the pocket he heard riders coming through the oak grove he had just ridden through.

"A blind pocket, and riders movin' in behind us, Sleeper!" Long Sam said.

He hopped out of the saddle, moved back close to the mouth of the gulch, and crouched down in a thick clump of fuzzy young pines. Hoofs pounded closer, and Long Sam peeled deadly six-shooters from black holsters.

There were two of the riders. The outlaw knew that from the rolling beat of hoofs over the spongy ground. One rider was several rods ahead of the other, and Long Sam heaved a sigh of relief when the fellow sped past the mouth of the gulch. The second rider came on up and was even with the gulch mouth when his horse broke stride. There was a thin, anguished cry, the thump of something slamming down on the ground. Then the horse went on, running smoothly again.

But Long Sam's keen ears had not been fooled. The rider of that second horse had either jumped or fallen from saddle! Long Sam had heard that fellow hit the ground, and had caught the unmistakable sound of empty stirrups slapping as the riderless horse sped away.

"Mopey, come back!" a voice cried out suddenly. "Help me, Mopey. Ben Moore and them two pals of his will nab me. And they'll take the money off me, Mopey!"

ALREADY Long Sam was on his feet and moving. That had been a thin, strained voice, bearing eerily the toneless sound of a man dying. The outlaw halted just inside the mouth of the gulch, smoky eyes riveted on a scrawny, pinch-faced man who was crawling painfully towards him, dragging a little black satchel in one hand.

"Mopey run off!" the man was whimpering. "And it was his idea that we rob Ben Moore and them other two of the twenty thousand we handed 'em at midnight, last night, for the stuff. But I'll get even. I've got the money. I'll hide. Ben Moore and them other two dope runners of Big Red's won't find me. I'll go to South America and live like—"

The man pitched down on his face, coughing violently. Long Sam walked out and squatted down beside the little man, knowing that he was dead when he glimpsed the flaccid face and the quivering, vacant eyes. He started to turn the man over but suddenly rocked back, head jerking up. Out on the road riders were moving at a hard clip, their voices lifted in angry shouting.

"Judas Priest!" Long Sam growled. "Robbery, murder, and dope runners! I'd better get out of here. Come along, little satchel!"

He snatched the black satchel the dead man had dropped, surprised at the lightness of it. He scuttled into the mouth of the gulch and stopped there in the brush, smoky eyes watching the black shadows beneath the oak grove that reached out to the road.

"Ben! Lon!" he heard a man yell. "Here's their sign. They quit the road and took to this timber!"

Long Sam slid into a tangle of brush and flattened down to wait. He stared at the small leather bag, feeling a kind of growing excitement in it as he remembered what the dying man had mumbled about 'twenty thousand dollars'. Then the outlaw's head jerked up, for hoofs were making sodden thunder over the stony ground beneath the oaks. He saw the riders a moment later.

"Three of them!" Long Sam droned.

As the men swept closer, Long Sam saw that a slim, dark fellow rode slightly in the lead, bending over to study the ground. On the slim man's right flank came a husky, freckle-faced fellow. The third man was squat, barrel-chested, and even tougher-visaged than his two companions.

"Hold it!" the slim man in the lead cried out, suddenly.

"What is it, Pike?" the squatty fellow

rasped. "You lost the sign of them sneakin' hellions?"

"I don't lose any sign I set out to read, and you know it, Ben!" the slim 'Pike' retorted. "Yonder lays a feller, up ahead. Looks like that shot you got off as them robbers skittered away took effect, after all."

"Watch it, boys!" the stocky Ben roared. "Lon, swing off wide to the left. I'll circle to the right. Move on in on that feller, Pike. Lon and me will cover you."

Pike rode up to the dead man, took one goggling look at him, then cursed a blue streak.

Ben and the big, freckled fellow named Lon both curbed their horses, scowling at Pike.

"What's the matter with you?" Ben, obviously the leader of the tough trio, yelled angrily.

"This is Cricket Meldorn, or the carcass of what was him!" Pike fumed. "Which means the other robber that took that satchel full of money away from us was nobody but Mopey Dugger!"

Ben and the big freckled Lon both spurred up to join Pike. They piled out of saddles, all three of them. And Long Sam Littlejohn heard some of the most sulphurous language he had ever listened to as the three men practically tore the clothes off 'Cricket' Meldorn's scrawny body in searching him.

"Just a few dollars, a handful of odds-and-ends, and the needle this wax-eared sneak used to punch dope into his hide with!" Ben roared. "Mopey Dugger got off with that twenty thousand, boys. Big Red will throw a million fits if we let Mopey get away."

"Watch it!" Pike warned. "Some cussed dude swung off the road and is chousin' out here."

Long Sam glanced off toward the road, and felt as if someone had dumped a bucket of iced water down the back of his shirt. A stubby little man was slanting in from the road, sitting high in the saddle on a tall black horse. The fellow wore a tailored brown suit, button shoes, and had a derby hat slanted down jauntily over one glittering, steel-gray eye. The frayed remnants of a cigar was gripped in one corner of the man's mouth, and he had a six-shooter in his right hand.

"That fool dude!" big, freckled Lon rumbled. "Ben, one of us ought to bust a cap just to see him jump!"

MIRTHLESSLY, Long Sam grinned. What a surprise Ben and those other two would get if they tried scaring the fellow jogging towards them. The man looked like a dude, sure enough. But he happened to be Joe Fry, deputy United States marshal!

"Clear out of here, you fool dude!" Ben shouted suddenly.

Joe Fry bit down on the cigar in his jaw. He came straight on, reining in when he was within a dozen yards of the three scowling and obviously surprised men.

"I'll give whatever orders are given!" Fry said crisply. "Deputy United States marshal speakin'. Joe Fry's the name. I heard shootin', a while ago. The man on the ground there is dead, I judge, from the looks of him. Did you—Now, now!"

Fry's voice ended on a purring kind of sound. Long Sam tensed, expecting the fireworks to start. Big, freckled Lon had suddenly uttered an oath and tried to swing a six-shooter to cover Fry. Lon found himself looking into the muzzzle of Fry's gun!

"My gosh, Fry, go easy!" Ben cried. "Lon Bucknell wasn't tryin' to throw down on you. Him and Pike Wigby, the slim feller there, work for me. I'm Ben Moore, and own a little spread down in the brush country, along the river."

"Mornin', gentlemen!" Fry droned. "And the man on the ground, there?"

"We never laid eyes on the cuss before!" Ben Moore declared. "But I guess I killed him, at that."

"You guess?" Fry echoed.

"I sold off a few head of hosses yesterday, Fry!" Ben Moore said promptly. "Me and these two boys was comin' up from the ranch this mornin', aimin' to put the money in the bank down at Caney Bend. But just as he come to the road, back yonder a piece, a feller hollers 'Hands up or die!' at us. We see a couple of gun muzzles showin' through some bushes."

"You took a chance and fought?"

"Blazes, no!" Ben Moore grinned. "I was scared, and don't mind admittin' it. Them fellers ordered me to toss down the saddle bags I was luggin', and I done it. Then they told all three of us to ride off

and not look back. We done that, too. Only I did look back when I heard brush cracklin' behind me, and seen them two fellers scootin' away from there. I drawed and fired, and one of 'em shore hollered. Pike and Lon got their guns out then, and all three of us poured lead into the brush."

"I took their trail, and it led us to this feller layin' here," Pike Wigby declared.

"I see you three did a good searching job!" Fry growled. "Who was this fellow, anyhow?"

"That's what stumps us, marshal!" Ben Moore lied brazenly. "Us boys combed this feller's clothes, hopin' we'd find papers or somethin' that'd tell us who he is. But his pardner evidently cleaned his pockets out before he dropped him here."

"What did the other one look like?" Joe Fry asked harshly.

"I only got a glimpse of them two robbers, marshal," Ben Moore shrugged blocky shoulders.

"You must have seen a few details of the other man's appearance!" Fry snapped. "But I've got a hunch that I can name the hellion for you. Was he unusually tall, dressed in solid black from boots to flat-crowned hat, and ridin' a splay-footed, rat-tailed old roan horse?"

Long Sam had to lock his teeth and hold his breath to guard against yelling a furious reply to Joe Fry's sly prompting. The tall outlaw knew what was coming. Joe Fry managed to tie Long Sam's name to every crime that was committed along the Rio!

"By dogs, Marshal Fry, I believe you hit it!" Ben Moore was saying cautiously. "One of them bandits did look mighty tall. I'm sure the feller had on a black hat. You got a notion who the feller was?"

"I've got more than just a notion, men!" Fry snapped. "That tall hellion was Long Sam Littlejohn!"

"No!" Ben Moore and his two tough companions chorused.

Long Sam got so blazing angry his body quivered against the sandy ground. But there was nothing he could do. He let his breath out slowly, watching Ben Moore, Pike Wigby and Lon Bucknell try to keep from grinning.

"Let's get goin'!" big Lon Bucknell rumbled. "Us fellers can give you a hand runnin' that Littlejohn buzzard down, marshal."

"I'll handle Littlejohn without help!" Fry said crisply. "Leave this body right where it is, and head for Caney Bend. Report this matter to your sheriff."

"Littlejohn evidently took his dead pard's mount along with him, marshal," Pike Wigby put in quickly. "He'll ride them two hosses in relays, and be hard to overtake."

"I've been on Sam Littlejohn's heels for at least fifty hours right now, day and night, without losin' him!" Fry said.

FRY loped away through the timber, keen eyes easily following the double row of hoof prints that led on up the bottoms. Long Sam watched in silent fury while Ben Moore and his two tough companions laughed until tears streamed down their faces.

"Talk about a deal made to order!" Pike Wigby panted.

"I'd like to see the look on that Littlejohn monkey's face when he hears how he robbed us!" Lon Bucknell guffawed. "Let's sift to town and tell Bruce the joke."

Ben Moore straightened with a jerk. The mirth fell away from him instantly, and Long Sam saw fury blaze up in the man's greenish eyes.

"Town, nothin'!" Moore croaked. "Hit leather, fellers."

"What's botherin' you?" Pike Wigby asked, sobering.

"We've got to get ahead of Joe Fry and mess up the sign he's follerin'!" Moore snapped. "He'll nab Mopey Dugger, if we don't!"

"And Mopey Dugger has got them packages of narcotics we sold him and this Cricket Meldorn cuss last night, plus the twenty thousand dollars him and Cricket robbed us of 'fore we could get to town with the dinero and turn it over to Bruce!" Lon Bucknell groaned. "Mopey would give up head like a roped yearlin' if Fry nabbed him."

"We're sunk, if we let Fry get hold of Mopey!" Pike Wigby yelped. "One of us better go to town and tell Bruce about this so's he can try to get word to Big Red!"

"To blazes with Bruce Claypool and Big Red!" Ben Moore growled. "Us three

better keep Joe Fry from nabbin' Mopey Dugger. If Mopey got nabbed by the law and talked, that mysterious Big Red son might have us three bushwhacked!"

"Like it happened to Pete Willard, huh?" Lon Bucknell droned, shuddering.

Long Sam jumped nervously. He tried to tell himself that he was putting the wrong interpretation on Bucknell's words. But Ben Moore exploded that hope in a hurry.

"That struttin' Pete Willard got his lead ticket to Gehanna for bein' too nosy!" Moore said. "He wanted to know who Big Red really is, and kept tryin' cute little tricks, like hidin' out to watch to see who come to the Split Tree cache to pick up the mazuma Mopey Dugger and other big-time dope peddlers pay us."

"Wonder if Big Red himself twisted that rifle ball into struttin' sheriff Pete Willard?" Pike Wigby said as he laughed grimly.

"If we knowed this cuss who signs 'Big Red' on the printed orders he sends out, we'd savvy whether he's the kind who'd pull a bushwhack killin' or not!" Ben Moore snorted.

"I still say one of us ought to go warn Bruce Claypool!" Pike Wigby declared as the three mounted. "Bruce is strutty since he got elevated to actin' sheriff. He ought to be told how Mopey Dugger and Cricket Meldorn doublecrossed us."

Ben Moore growled a reply of some kind, but the three men were spurring away, and Long Sam could not catch Moore's words. The outlaw lay there for a few moments, trying to make some kind of order out of the wild thoughts that were flashing through his mind. Strutting, big-mouthed Pete Willard had been using his sheriff's badge to shield a band of big-time drug smugglers!

Long Sam sat up, pushed his guns into holsters, and picked up the scuffed black satchel Cricket Meldorn had been carrying. The outlaw's bloodshot eyes shone excitedly, and his long fingers shook a little as he worked at the catches on the satchel. He got the little bag open and spread the jaws wide, a wild something pounding through him when he saw the tight bundles of yellow-backed bills.

"Big bills!" the outlaw cried excitedly. "Money that'd go into the filthy hands of a dope-running renegade, if I turned it in to this actin' sheriff, Bruce Claypool. Dirty money! Only it wouldn't be dirty if a man used it right. And down in South America—"

Long Sam broke off, shaking with excitement as he snapped the bag shut, then stood up. He bored through the brush to his horse and went into saddle, the fatigue in him burned away by glowing plans that kept tumbling through his mind.

"Rattle them hoofs, Sleeper!" he laughed. "I've made that South America stake at last, boy! We'll have to chouse past the Boxed O and tell Zella the good news, too."

Long Sam grinned hugely as he rode down through the quiet bottomlands. There had been few times in his life when he had known such pleasant dreams of peace and safety. He forgot the bone-deep ache of fatigue, and his spirits had climbed to glowing heights by the time he rode from the mouth of Sugar Creek Canyon and saw the huge Boxed O ranchhouse, deep in the shade of native pines.

"With Joe Fry around, Sleeper, we can't dally long," the outlaw said. "But headin' on to South America without seein' Zella wouldn't be—What in blue blazin' hades!"

THE tall outlaw's voice became a shocked whisper on the last sentence. He had ridden close enough to get his first clear look at the Boxed O ranchhouse and other buildings. He closed weary eyes for a moment, then opened them and looked again at the place. He groaned as if he suddenly knew deep physical suffering.

"Deserted!" he croaked. "My gosh, nobody has lived here in so long the weeds and brush have taken over. The corrals have about fallen down, and the whole place—"

He broke off, a new wave of shock going over him. The place was not deserted, despite the rundown look of it. Smoke trickled up from the kitchen chimney. Chickens scratched in the shade beside a shed. And a horse whinnied somewhere out in the jungles of brush and weeds that surrounded the once fine barn.

"Squatters roostin' here, I'll bet!" Long Sam grumbled.

He rode over a brush-grown area that had once been beautiful lawn bordered by

flower beds. He halted in a weedy back yard, feeling a little sick inside. The outlaw shook his head regretfully as he swung out of the saddle and went toward huge sandstone steps.

"Hello!" he sang out. "Anybody—"

That was as far as Long Sam got. A slender woman, with dark auburn hair and gray-green eyes that looked enormous in a thin face, had stepped to the back door. She had on a sun-faded hickory shirt that had been built to fit a boy, and dark gray homespun breeches. There were a pair of boots on her feet that were battered from hard usage, cracked with age, and obviously several sizes too big for her.

"Zella?" Long Sam said.

"Sam!" the woman cried.

She was leaping across the porch and down the steps, curly auburn hair flying, her soft, red mouth laughing. She bounded to Long Sam and threw her arms around his broad shoulders, laughing and yet crying, too. The outlaw took his hat off and held it in his left hand, staring down at the bright head of the girl who clung to him.

"Oh, Sam!" she choked. "You've no idea how glad I am to see you. When you spank, you spank gosh-awfully hard, don't you?"

"Spank?" Long Sam echoed blankly.

The girl lifted her face then, white teeth flashing as she grinned. She dropped her arms, brushed tears from her cheeks, and laughed in a low, mirthless sound that made him uneasy.

"Four years ago, Sam, I stood right on this very back porch and gave you a bawling out for trying to give me the most sensible advice anyone ever offered," Zella told him, sobering. "You tried to tell me that Pete Willard was a big-mouthed, spur-jingling fortune-hunter, and I turned hellcat instead of—"

"Stop it, girl!" Long Sam cut in sharply.

He pulled his glance away from the girl's face, worry in his eyes as he looked around the shabby place that had once been so different. He remembered Zella in her beautiful clothes, her bright-eyed gaiety and downright devilishness. He did not want to look back at her just now, yet she touched his arm.

"You know that Pete is dead, I suppose?" she asked quietly.

"I heard it, but only about an hour ago." he admitted.

"Pete has been dead about fifteen months, Sam," the girl told him gravely. "He rode up to the front steps and fell off his horse just at daylight, that morning. He told me a terrible tale of having been mixed up in a ring of rotten drug smugglers, and stammered something about a boss named Big Red, who had bled him for thousands of dollars before letting him come into the business of smuggling narcotics. Pete was trying to tell me this Big Red's real name when he died."

"Judas, girl!" Long Sam croaked. "I'm sorry Pete got into such a mess as that. Did he name this Big Red?"

"Pete did not get the name told before he died," the girl shrugged wearily. "And don't waste your sympathy. If Pete had not bought his way into the narcotics smuggling, he would have found something else low to mix up in. He blew every dollar Dad left, Sam. Then Pete sold our fine herds, and whooped that money off as fast as he got it. When Pete died, the Caney Bluff banker informed me that I owe eight thousand dollars on this place. Pete had mortgaged the land."

"Blazes!" Long Sam growled. "But one thing sure, old Fred Turner won't crowd you on that paper. Your daddy staked Fred, set him up with that Commerce Bank at Caney Bend."

"Fred Turner sold the bank, three years ago," Zella replied evenly. "A banker named Harold Budlong has the Commerce Bank now, Sam."

"This banker aims to grab this ranch?" Long Sam yelped.

"Mr. Budlong has told me frankly that he will be unable to renew the note, pointing out that I'm a poor risk," Zella explained. "And I can't blame him, Sam. The few cattle I have left on this place are the worst sort of scrubby culls."

"Well, quit worryin' about it," Long Sam forced a huge grin.

He had a mental picture of a certain little black bag. He thought of South America and felt his weariness come back with crushing force. He kept his grin wide and cheerful, however.

"Sam, I'm still a selfish, spoiled brat!" Zella cried out. "Here I've stood gabbing my own silly troubles, not even noticing

that you're so weary you're ready to fall. And poor old Sleeper is in even worse shape. Trouble, Sam?"

"In the form of a runty little dude named Joe Fry, who is a deputy United States marshal!" Long Sam chuckled. "I'll have to shove along."

"Not until we've fed Sleeper and you've had a meal!" the girl cried. "Come along, now. We'll hide Sleeper in the thickets beyond the corrals. Bruce Claypool might find the old fellow if we put him in the barn, for Bruce promised to ride out this morning for a visit."

"Bruce Claypool?" Long Sam echoed the name, keeping his voice steady.

"Bruce was Pete's head deputy," Zella explained. "He became acting sheriff after Pete's death. And I'm afraid of that big, black-eyed devil, Sam!"

"Why are you afraid of Claypool?" Long Sam wanted to know.

"I'm not exactly sure," Zella declared. "But I have a feeling that he is trying to dig into Pete's dope-running activities. Bruce is smooth, and has never asked anything outright."

"You evidently never told this Claypool fellow any of the things Pete said when Pete was dyin'," Long Sam droned.

"Gollies, no!" Zella gasped. "Sam, I've never whispered a word of that to anyone until I told you about it."

PICKING up Sleeper's reins, Long Sam walked down a weed-bordered path to the corrals, Zella beside him. She pointed out a towering thicket back of the corrals and told him to take Sleeper on there, then ran ahead and went into the barn.

By the time Long Sam got into the thicket and got the saddle off his horse, Zella came scrambling over the back of the corral, carrying a feed bucket that had a generous amount of shelled corn in the bottom of it. Sleeper buried his nose in the yellow corn, nickering his thanks.

"Now a meal for you, Sam!" Zella said almost gayly.

"Thanks, Zella," Long Sam grinned wearily. "But you go ahead. I want to swap these duds I've got on for some that're not quite so full of grit."

Zella hurried away through the thicket, and Long Sam squatted down on his heels, untying the dust-coated roll from behind his saddle. He put aside the little black satchel that held a small fortune in cash, then got his warbag out of the roll. He laid out socks, underwear, tough black trousers and a black sateen shirt. The garments were wrinkled from having been wadded in his warbag, but the tall outlaw felt better when he had effected a complete change of clothing.

"Now, about this dinero," he droned.

He picked up the black bag, opened it, and dug four packets of money from it. Each packet was secured by a stout paper binder cinched around the middle of the bills. On each paper binder Long Sam saw $5,000.00 neatly penned in black ink.

"Little old Bob Ogden, Zella's daddy, left her at least twenty-five-hundred head of graded cattle and somethin' like thirty thousand dollars in cash, along with this Box O land," Long Sam mused. "Say the cattle didn't bring over twenty dollars a head when they were sold, that'd tote up to fifty thousand dollars. Add to that the thirty thousand cash Zella's daddy left her, plus whatever the fine Boxed O horses brought, and it would run up close to a hundred thousand dollars.

"Pete Willard blew that money. He spent some, maybe most of it, buyin' his way into the dirtiest business on earth—dope runnin'. And this money here came out of the hands of the very bunch Pete Willard was caperin' with. So this money is Zella's, to my way of thinkin'!"

Long Sam stood up, hurled the little black bag far out into the tangled brush, then stuffed the packets of money inside his shirt. He left the thicket and went back towards the ranchhouse, still frowning thoughtfully.

"I've got to work this just right!" he decided aloud. "If I just up and offer Zella the money as a loan, she'd wart the life out of me, wantin' to know where I got it! Blamed if I know how to—"

Long Sam's voice ended on a croaking sound that was the breath whistling out of his lungs. A savage blow had slammed against his ribs, high on the right side. He was spinning and falling when he heard the thunder of a shot and saw smoke fog up from thick brush near the old corral!

Long Sam's deadly guns were in his hands even as he hit the ground. He saw a rifle barrel snake out of the foliage and tilt downward. The six-shooters in his

bony fists were beating a thunderous volley of lead into the bushes before the rifle blazed again. A man yelled, pitching forward out of the brush!

But Long Sam was scarcely aware of the big, burly figure pitching out of those bushes. Six-shooters had opened up on him from the same thicket. He felt the hat knocked off his head, a blister burst across his left cheek and a wad of soil kicked into his face by bullets before he could even shift his guns.

Now Zella's voice wailed out somewhere behind him, but he dared not turn and warn the girl to stay back. He blasted a shot at a shadowy movement behind one of those spitting six-shooters just as a bullet scraped the top of his hunched back.

Long Sam's shot had brought a bellow of pain from the man he had fired at. Now the bushes parted violently, and big Lon Bucknell stumbled out into full view, gunless hands clamped to a smashed mouth.

Long Sam's guns both roared when he saw another bush wiggle, but the sound of them was drowned in something that roared like a couple of sticks of dynamite going off. The gaunt outlaw jerked his head around just in time to see Zella Willard drop backwards into a patch of weeds, clutching a huge shotgun that trickled smoke.

Long Sam lurched to his feet and started toward the girl, only to whirl when brush crackled and men began howling behind him. The outlaw's deadly guns whipped up when he saw stocky Ben Moore and slim Pike Wigby stagger out of the bushes. They were clawing and yelling as if their shirts were full of angry hornets. The outlaw closed in on them, guns covering them.

"Shut up, both of you!" he roared.

"Buckshot!" Ben Moore bleated. "I'm hurtin' all over!"

WHEN Long Sam saw that there would be no controling the two toughs, he slapped Ben Moore sprawling with the barrel of his right hand pistol. Then he downed Pike Wigby with a chopping motion of his left hand six-shooter. Zella came running up, looking a little pale around the lips, but still packing the eight-gauge scattergun that had kicked her down when she fired both barrels of it simultaneously.

"Gollies, Sam!" she gasped. "You're hurt!"

"That big, fancy-dressed cuss layin' yonder came close to nailin' me with a rifle slug, but I'm not hurt much," Long Sam replied. "Let's have a look at that cuss and see if you know him."

"Know him!" Zella cried angrily. "That's Bruce Claypool, Sam!"

Long Sam grunted sharply, walking to where the acting sheriff lay sprawled. He toed the man over and found himself looking down into a pair of coldly furious black eyes that glared at him from a pain whitened face. Claypool's left leg was twisted badly, broken half way between thigh and knee by Long Sam's bullet. The outlaw holstered his six-shooters when he saw that, squatted on his heels, and whisked a fancy pistol from a holster at Claypool's belt.

"You're under arrest, Long Sam Littlejohn!" Bruce Claypool said.

"Look, stupid, you've lost your taw!" Long Sam retorted. "Pete Willard paid a lot of money to get into the dope smugglin' business, and was downright put out about the bullet he got in his back. Zella has been too wise to let on to you, naturally. But Pete was able to talk when he got home."

Long Sam had been watching Bruce Claypool closely as he talked. The big man's face got as white as bleached bone, and now his whole powerful muscled body was quivering as he turned baleful eyes on Zella. The girl looped an arm around one of Long Sam's arms, pressing against him like a frightened child.

"So you've known, all these months!" Claypool snarled. "I was afraid Pete got a good look at me that night. I dug up the money where my letter told him to bury it. I would have ridden away, unaware that the blasted fool had seen me, if his horse hadn't nickered to my horse. Why didn't you go to the Rangers and tell them that I'm Big Red?"

"Sam!" Zella wailed.

"So that's it!" Long Sam whooped in delight. "We've busted the dirtiest bunch of dope peddlers this side of hades. Now—"

"Now claw the sky, Sammy, or I'll make bait out of you!" a hard voice said.

Long Sam strangled, recognizing Joe Fry's gravelly voice before he whirled and saw the stocky deputy stepping out of the brush, six-shooter leveled. Fry pranced up, cocky and confident, grinning around the battered butt of the cigar in his jaw. He started to say something, but suddenly Zella Willard sprang out from Long Sam's side, the fury of a tigress in her motions. "Another dope peddler with a gun!" she yelled.

Long Sam shouted a warning, but too late. Zella swapped ends with the eight gauge, and brought the shiny stock down like a paddle atop Joe Fry's derby. The deputy's knees buckled, the six-shooter flew out of his chubby fist, and he was trying to gag up the half-swallowed cigar butt when he sprawled on the ground.

Long Sam pounced on Fry like a lean tomcat grabbing a mouse, but was laughing so hard it took him almost a full minute to yank the deputy's handcuffs from a coat pocket and link the yowling officer's wrists together.

"Bray, you spraddle-legged jackass!" Fry screamed in fury.

"Sam, what's so darned funny?" Zella asked, unease sharpening her voice.

"This queer lookin' critter you swatted is Joe Fry, deputy United States marshal, Zella!" Long Sam guffawed.

"Oh, my stars!" the girl gasped.

"Littlejohn, listen to me!" Fry panted. "I hate you, hide, horns and tallow. But I hate drug smugglers like this Claypool devil and his three men, here, almost as bad. Don't hightail and let these dope runners escape, too."

"Could you build a case against Bruce Claypool and these other three hellions, Joe?" Long Sam asked sharply.

"I've got the case built!" Fry glared. "The full details would make too long a story. But I nabbed a notorius dope peddler named Mopey Dugger, over in the hills, a while ago. I was ridin' Dugger's sign away from a corpse, and thought I was trailin' you. Dugger turned back huntin' his pardner, who was the corpse I mentioned."

JOE FRY continued his tale:

"When Mopey Dugger saw me ridin' his sign, he tried smokin' me down. I had to shoot the blasted fool! But before he died he named actin' sheriff Bruce Claypool, there, and these other three buzzards, Ben Moore, Pike Wigby and Lon Bucknell, as the backbone of one of the rottenest gangs of drug-smugglers along the Border.

"Dugger claimed some mysterious party called 'Big Red' heads the dope ring. I was hunkered in there in the brush, when I heard you and Zella Willard get Claypool to confess that he is Big Red! Sam, I want these hellions to toss in the pen! Get these handcuffs off me and let me arrest them!"

"Joseph, you've got yourself a mess of dope-smugglers!" Long Sam grinned. "You don't get loose to give me trouble, so quit thinkin' you will. But I'll hogtie this bunch before I scoot for Mexico. Zella will have your handcuff key. When I'm gone, she'll let you loose, and you can head for the cooler with your Border scum. How's that for a deal?"

"I hate like sin to see you get away!" Fry rasped. "But I want these dope runners, so tie the dirty dogs good and tight!"

Zella got ropes from a shed without having to be asked, and five minutes later Bruce Claypool and his three ace smugglers were securely bound. Ben Moore and Pike Wigby were still scared half out of their wits, totally unaware that they had not been sprayed with deadly buckshot, but with very fine bird shot that had merely punctured their skins.

Lon Bucknell was out cold, having had his upper lip considerably damaged by a slug from one of Long Sam's guns. The tall outlaw stanched dangerous bleeding in Bruce Claypool's wounded leg, using clean cloth Zella brought from the house. That attended to, Long Sam tied Joe Fry securely to a stout bush, then stood up.

"Be seein' you, runt!" he said to the raging officer. "And bum huntin', next time you cut my sign."

Long Sam turned away, Zella close beside him as he strode toward the big ranchhouse. He looked down at the girl, seeing that excitement had put new life into her lovely face. He thought of the packets of money inside his shirt, and reckoned that Zella's excitement would sure hit a high pitch when he laid that money in her hands, and made her understand that it was rightfully hers to use in putting this fine ranch back in shape on its feet again.

Shotgun went hurtling at a man in front of the barber shop

SHERIFF'S RAFFLE

By JOSEPH F. HOOK

THERE was a smile on Sheriff Sam Sawyer's wrinkled face, a glint of pride in his blue eyes, and his handlebar mustache bristled with suppressed excitement as he regarded his deputy, Shotgun Shadwell.

The sheriff laid a parcel and a poster on his desk. He took a hammer and some tacks from a drawer and nailed the poster in a prominent place on the office wall.

"Take a good look at that mug," he

Sam Sawyer admitted he had brains, but Deputy Shotgun Shadwell doubted it when it came to winning tickets—and wanted outlaws!

said, "and try to remember it. That's a pitcher of One-eye Watson, the stage robber, with two thousand dollars reward on his head. Poster says you don't hafta be partic'lar whether you bring him in on the flat of his back or standin' up. Not that that means anything to you. About the only way you'll ever ketch One-eye is if he comes in here, wakes you up and holds out his hands for the handcuffs."

"Oh, him," Shotgun observed sleepily. "Why, he ain't nowhere's around this neck o' the woods. Last job he pulled was way down in Oregon Territory."

"Well," the sheriff said cynically, "I ain't had no word yet that he's paralized, or that all the horses in the country has fell dead. Just take nothin' for granted, Shotgun."

"What you got in that package?" Shotgun inquired.

"Tickets for the biggest raffle ever staged in the Montana Territory. Sundance is growin' so fast that we've gotta raise funds for an addition to the school. And me, I'm the promoter. I got everything arranged, too."

"Yeah?" Shotgun said, interested. "What about the prizes?"

"The first one is a team of fast trottin' coach hosses, the gift of Limber Legs Lawson, owner of the QT spread."

"What!" Shotgun exclaimed excitedly. "A team of trotters."

"Yeah, I can just see me and the missus, a-settin' in a rubber-tired buggy and drivin' them trottin' bays down the main stem with everybody's eyes buggin' out with jealousy."

"Oh, you can, huh?" Shotgun sneered. "Well, fella, don't be so cocksure of your luck. I'm taking a dozen chances on 'em, myself, right now."

"On your salary, Shotgun, you couldn't afford to drive a team of burros hitched to a wheelbarrow."

"We'll see about that," Shotgun promised. "Now what's the second prize?"

"A piano, donated by Bill Hogan who owns the furniture store."

"Ain't int'rested," Shotgun said. "What's the next prize?"

"The third and last," the sheriff replied expansively, "is a hundred-dollar carbine rifle, donated by the Winchester salesman. It's special made, with pictures etched on the breech and along the barrel. The scabbard is hand-tooled leather."

"I'll take two dozen chances on it," Shotgun offered quickly.

"Oh, you will, will you?" the sheriff said. "Well, I'll see them two dozen and raise you a dozen more."

"You ain't bluffing me out," Shotgun assured him. "I'll see you and raise you another dozen."

SAWYER did some rapid figuring on a scratch pad. "At four bits a chance," he informed his deputy, "you've done blowed in half a month's wages already."

"Never mind about that," Shotgun argued. "I got forty bucks cached away."

The sheriff opened the package of tickets, filled out a number for himself and his deputy, dropped them and the money in a desk drawer, then handed him the balance of the tickets.

"What's the big idea?" Shotgun demanded, accepting them with reluctance.

"If you was to put on a clean pair of chaps," the sheriff went on blandly, "shine up them dirty boots, put a silk kerchief around yore thick neck, and borrow a Stetson from somebody that wasn't floppy and all chawed up, you wouldn't be such a bad-lookin hombre. "

"Meaning which?" Shotgun inquired.

"That the ladies would mob you to buy them tickets," the sheriff explained glibly.

"Just what I suspicioned. Whenever you get an idea, I'm the goat that has to do all the work. And just how do you suppose I can talk a woman inta taking chances on a rifle and a team of trotters? Even if I could, what would she do with a team or a Winchester?"

"Women have husbands, brothers and sweethearts," the sheriff reminded him impatiently. "Besides, there's the piano. Every woman dreams of some day havin' one a-settin' in the parlor. So now's her chance."

Shotgun stuffed the tickets in his pocket, picked up a pencil stub and left the office. He went directly to the hardware store, where a crowd of men were standing before the window.

Shotgun's six foot two enabled him to look over their heads at the prize Win-

chester and handsomely tooled leather scabbard. He promptly took out the pencil stub and wrote his name on a dozen more tickets.

"All right, boys," he called out, then. "Step right up and buy your chances, at only four bits per each, if you want that rifle. . . . Now quit shoving, fellers! . . . How many, Bill? . . . Ten, you say? Well, here y'are, you piker."

The last man accommodated, Shotgun glanced along the street. A group of women were looking through the furniture store window at the prize piano, oh-ing and ah-ing and all talking at once.

"That sheriff and his dolling up," Shotgun muttered, bearing down upon them with a fistful of tickets. "Selling 'em chances is going to be easier'n stealing candy from a kid."

WITH the exception of one building, Sundance was a deserted town on the night of the big drawing. That one building was the school house, where a temporary stage had been erected. On it were the town's officials, the beaming sheriff, excited and giggling little Emily Rogers, who was going to do the drawing, and a beer keg containing all the ticket stubs. The keg stood on a table, and beside the table were the piano and Winchester rifle.

There was hardly room enough to breathe, and the din of voices was deafening. Expectancy and hope illumined every eye, and impatience weighed heavily upon all.

At last the sheriff stepped to the front of the stage, and silence enveloped the jam-packed crowd.

"Ladies and gents." he said, "we'll now start the drawin'. Sorry we only had room for two of the prizes—the piano, and rifle. But the team of trotters was brung in this evenin' by Limber Legs Lawson, and is in Jake Smithers' livery stable awaitin' the lucky winner."

He lifted the girl to the table. Then he shook the beer keg, raised the lid, and little Emily put in a groping hand, extracting a ticket stub.

The sheriff took it, his eyes popping as he glanced at the name, choked back his Adam's apple, and then spoke.

"Ladies and gents, the winner of the first prize and the team of trotters is" — taking a last glance at the stub— "is Miss Minerva Mullins!"

The silence was shattered by a screech from Sundance's maiden seamstress of uncertain age as she fainted dead away.

"Leaping longhorns!" Shotgun exclaimed in disgust, as thunderous laughter rocked the building. "She's got as much use for them hosses as I'd have for three thumbs."

After the unconscious Miss Minerva Mullins had been carried outside, little Emily again felt in the beer keg and came up with another ticket stub. The women leaned forward, eyes wide with expectancy, hope and excitement.

The sheriff took it with fingers that shook visibly, and glanced at the name. "Ladies and gents," he stammered, "the— the second prize—the new piano—goes to —to—goes to Andy Hackem, our barber!"

A silly sheepish grin overspread Andy's cherubic face as the crowd screamed with laughter. Andy Hackem, the barber, winning a piano! What earthly use could a confirmed bachelor like Andy have for a piano?

"Mebbe," Shotgun suggested to a neighbor between guffaws, "he can get somebody to play it and keep a customer's mind off being nicked with the razor."

Not until after the barber had joined Miss Minerva Mullins in the fresh air, to gather his scattered wits, was quiet restored. Then little Emily dug into the beer keg and drew out a ticket stub for the third and last time. The sheriff was now so nervous that he almost dropped it. Sweat beaded his troubled brow.

When he glanced fearfully at the stub, the sweat beads ran together, forming little rivulets which coursed down the deep wrinkles in his cheeks.

He took a deep breath, and announced in a faltering voice, "The third prize, ladies and gents—the fancy Winchester carbine—has been won by none other than Ann Custer, waitress in the Sundance beanery!"

This seemed even funnier to the audience than the seamstress winning the team of trotters. A beanery biscuit-shooter winning a Winchester rifle! Well, as one wag among many observed to the bewildered sheriff, Dishpan Ann could use it to shoot holes through doughnuts or

use the butt to pound tough steaks.

However, Dishpan Ann was of different metal than the seamstress. Instead of going into hysterics or fainting, she ascended to the stage, grabbed the rifle and scabbard from the flabbergasted sheriff's hands, and waved them above her head.

"Oh boy, oh boy, oh boy!" she shrilled happily. "Gangway for Annie Oakley!"

Shotgun Shadwell threw away his now worthless raffle tickets with a disgusted gesture, and filed out with the hilarious crowd.

"Doggone the doggone luck!" he muttered. "I'd oughta have been born a woman."

THE sheriff looked like he'd put in a sleepless night when he entered his office next morning.

"Of all the cockeyed raffles I ever attended," he said to his deputy, "that one last night sure took the cake! But, it's all over and done with now, and the school board shore got a handsome wad for a new addition. "

Shotgun, who was standing at the window, said, "So it's all over and done with, huh. Well, brother, if me eyes ain't went back on me, your troubles is just beginning. I see Miss Minerva Mullins entering the courthouse."

"Oh, me!" the sheriff sighed, as footsteps sounded on the stairs.

The seamstress came directly to the point. "Sheriff," she said, "I appreciate the honor of winning a team of coach horses for four bits, but I'm sure they can't help me with my sewing. I was wondering if you could sell them for me. I just wouldn't know how to go about it myself."

"Why, of course, Minerva," the sheriff replied. "Nothin' to it. They's plenty of hombres in Sundance who'll fall all over theirselves to buy 'em off you. Just leave it to me, Minerva."

After she'd gone Shotgun cynically remarked, "Oh, shore, it'll be easy to sell 'em. But did you stop to consider that if them guys was so crazy to buy them trotters they'd have went to Minerva afore she come here?"

"Always makin' mountains outa molehills," the sheriff retorted. "I'd buy 'em off her myself, only I'm a bit strapped right now."

Shotgun turned back to the window. "Mebbe," he said in a minute or two, "your missus could use a piano, if she can't ride behind them fast trotters. Anyway, here comes the barber."

Andy Hackem wanted the sheriff to find a buyer for his piano, which, he said, was taking up far too much room in his shop. The sheriff sent him happily on his way with the same assurance he had given the seamstress.

"Now, to make it a perfect headache," the sheriff sighed wearily, "Dishpan Ann had oughta bring that rifle over for me to sell."

"Don't worry about Dishpan Ann and that rifle," Shotgun assured him. "I heard at least ten guys try to buy it off her last night, but they was nothing doing. Dishpan Ann says she's gonna learn to shoot it if kills her. And it prob'ly will."

The sheriff learned much about salesmanship during the course of the next several days. Some of the Sundance women told him they couldn't afford a piano. Others assured him they'd love to own one, only they couldn't play. Several reminded him that they could not learn either, because there wasn't a music teacher closer than Great Falls, a hundred miles away.

It was even worse with the team of trotters. Jake Smithers, the livery stable owner, said he had all the horses he could handle. Sawdust Sid Shelley said they were too light for work around his mill and logging camp. The sod-busters repeated it. The ranchers didn't want them because they weren't mares, and also because you couldn't make saddlers of coach horses. The private citizen's, like the sheriff himself, had buggy and saddle horses, but said they couldn't afford a team.

One afternoon while the sheriff was out, trying to dispose of the two raffle prizes, Shotgun went over for a chat with Dishpan Ann in the beanery, where she was employed.

HE SAID in his most winsome way—dropping the Dishpan, of course—"Ann, I savvy you don't wanna sell that rifle, but if you ever change your mind, will you gimme first chance at it?"

"Being as it's you, Shotgun," Dishpan Ann said coyly, "I sure will. But I'm getting pretty good at handling it myself. You want me to show you?"

Before Shotgun could utter a protest, Dishpan Ann reached under the counter and came up with the carbine. She levered a shell into the breech and stepped to the door. Shotgun followed her, wonderingly.

"See that eating tobacco sign over the barber shop?" Dishpan Ann asked him, standing on the step. The sign was circular and of heavy tin. A mule's head was painted on it, and around the rim the words: CHEW MULE AND GET A BIG KICK.

Suddenly Dishpan Ann clapped the rifle stock to her shoulder and closed her left eye. Bang! went the rifle. Bong! answered the sign, as the bullet put out one of the mule's eyes and started the tin disc swinging wildly.

"Not so bad for a biscuit-shooter, eh?" Dishpan Ann said proudly.

People poured into the street, wondering what the shooting was about. Shotgun made a fast get-away as he caught sight of the sheriff among them.

"Hey, Dishpan Ann, you cut that out, or I'll take that dad-ratted rifle away from you!" he yelled at her from across the street, "That's agin the law, and you know it."

"Aw, go herd sheep!" she shouted back. "You're just jealous because I won it."

When the sheriff entered his office, he slumped down on the swivel chair, a dejected, forlorn figure. After relating his failures to get rid of the two prizes he looked at his deputy.

"Ain't there nothin' you can think of to help out?" he asked.

"Nary a thought," Shotgun replied. "You started all this with your big brains. Me, I just sold most of the tickets."

"Oh, me!" the sheriff sighed.

"Don't sigh yet," Shotgun advised him, "'cause here comes Jake Smithers from the livery stable."

"Dad-rat it!" the sheriff exploded. "What in thunder you reckon he wants?"

Jake made it very plain what he wanted. "That team of hay-burning trotters has gotta be taken out for a run," he explained. "I've been turnin 'em inta the corral for an hour or two each day, but that ain't enough exercise for 'em."

"Okay, Jake," the sheriff said wearily. "I'll attend to it, right away." And when Jake had left, the lawman said to his deputy, "Go drive 'em around for a spell, Shotgun."

"Be hanged if I will!" Shotgun said in disgust. "I'm through trying to dig you out every time you get yourself in a hole."

The sheriff picked up a sheaf of court summonses and eyed Shotgun significantly; for if there was anything the deputy hated more than serving court papers, he hadn't met up with it as yet. So he eyed the documents as if they were rattlers.

"Oh, okay," he said, "okay," and stamped out of the office.

Jake Smithers helped Shotgun to hitch the salty team to a pole buggy, then hung to their bridles while Shotgun picked up the lines and got in.

"Let 'em ramble, Jake," he said.

The trotters took the bits between their teeth and forgot all about being trotters in the exuberance of the moment, the new-found freedom and the impulse of too much oats. They sped from the livery barnyard, turning the corner on two wheels and churning up clouds of dust as they galloped down the main drag.

SHOTGUN sawed away on the lines, which only seemed to urge the horses to greater effort. At the end of the main drag he swung them on to the stagecoach road and uttered a prayer that he wouldn't meet another vehicle.

Finally the team settled down to a fast trot, legs going like pistons, buggy wheels whirring. And just when Shotgun was wondering if they would ever run short of wind, the team slowed to a walk, then stopped and started snorting. Shotgun stared at the sight that greeted him, blinked, and stared again.

The Great Falls stagecoach was standing stockstill in the middle of the road, blocking it. The lead team was lying on the ground, blood oozing from nose and mouth. The swing and wheel teams were hopelessly entangled in their own harness and the lines. Seated on a rock beside the stalled stage was Broken-back Charlie, the driver, one leg straight out before him and with blood marking a hole in the trousers.

Wonderingly, Shotgun tied the trotters'

halters to a sapling. He surveyed the scene of chaos for another moment, then spoke to Charlie.

"What's happened?"

The driver's face contorted with pain. "A galoot held me up," he said. "Took the money I was bringing from the Belt bank for Sawdust Sid Shelley's payroll, shot my leaders so's I couldn't whip up and give the alarm, then plugged me in the leg."

"Any idee who he is?"

"Don't stand there asking a bleeding man such a fool question," Charlie said irritably. "The galoot was masked. Hustle up and get me to a doc."

Shotgun assisted Charlie into the stagecoach, then shucked his own gunbelt and tossed it in beside him. Charlie's profanity and the urgency of his bleeding leg goaded Shotgun into moving the dead leaders aside enough to allow the stage to pass, and untangling the other teams in record time. Then, unhooking the mettlesome trotters, he gave the pole buggy a shove off the road and hitched them in the lead.

HE CLIMBED to the driver's seat, released the brake and cracked the whip. The trotters with plenty of oat power still left in their sturdy legs, galloped madly forward, bellies almost touching the ground. This was Shotgun's first experience with three teams hitched tandem. The handful of lines in each fist confused him.

The swing and wheel teams, instinctively realizing that they were nearing the end of the journey, were just as anxious to run as the leaders. The pace became terrific, with the stage bouncing and swaying and taking the curves on two wheels.

The wounded driver stuck his head out of the stagecoach window and bawled at Shotgun.

"For cripes' sake, saw 'em down!" he shouted. "Use yore brake! I'm being slammed agin all four sides of thisyer coach to once!"

Shotgun raised his foot in an attempt to apply the brake, but the tugging of the galloping horses on the lines almost unseated him. So he just hung on grimly and let the running animals have their fool heads.

PRESENTLY Sundance loomed up through the shimmering heat waves. Reaching the outskirts Shotgun started yanking the leaders' lines to swing them toward the Wells-Fargo office, but they had ideas of their own. The livery stable was now home to them, and in that direction they headed, hell for leather.

The galloping team and stagecoach cut the courthouse corner too closely, and the off hind wheel bumped against the edge of the board walk, unseating Shotgun. He kept right on going through the air, and during that split second was conscious of several things at once.

People were pouring into the street in alarm. Voices in the barber shop were singing "Seeing Nellie Home." He was hurtling directly at a rider who had just dismounted in front of the same barber shop.

His body bumped against the rider with shocking impact, and both of them measured their lengths on the rough board sidewalk. Shotgun sat up and looked at the man he had knocked down. The man sat up too and looked at him. Looked at him venemously and through only one good eye.

"One-eye Watson!" Shotgun gasped, remembering that reward poster in the office.

The deputy's hand dropped to his waist. An expression of dismay settled on his face when he suddenly recalled that he had tossed his gun inside the stagecoach. One-eye leaped to his feet. His hand dived to his waist and came up with a very real sixgun as men came running from all directions.

At that breath-taking moment Dishpan Ann appeared in the beanery doorway with her prize Winchester. She caught sight of the tail end of the careening stagecoach through a cloud of dust, with men running after it and yelling excitedly. She also saw One-eye pointing his gun at the sitting, helpless Shotgun, as more men were breaking their necks to get out of the line of fire.

Dishpan Ann slapped the rifle stock against her shoulder, aimed at the chewing tobacco sign directly above One-eye's head, and pulled trigger.

Crack—bong!

One-eye jumped backward, glancing upward at the swaying, vibrating sign.

Suddenly Shotgun left the board walk head first, knocking One-eye's legs from under him. One-eye hit the boards on the flat of his face. Shotgun grabbed the gun, rolled him over on his back and sat on his chest. Those who had run to get out of the line of fire now rushed back and piled on the luckless outlaw. Sheriff Sam Sawyer came running up as Dishpan Ann plowed across the street through the deep dust.

Shotgun snapped handcuffs on the dazed and shocked outlaw and, with the sheriff's assistance, frisked him of a quantity of bills and a black mask. While the frisking was in progress, Shotgun related the events following his driving of the trotters from town.

Somebody in the crowd suddenly said, "By gravy, Dishpan Ann, you shot his other eye out!"

The waitress gazed down into the outlaw's eyeless socket with an expression of horror.

"Me?" she gasped. "Why-why, I didn't shoot his eye out! I aimed at that sign above us!"

"Yeah, that's what I mean," the voice explained. "You shot the mule's other eye out."

THE sheriff, always an opportunist, proceeded to grab off the honors while the grabbing was good. "Let him up now, boys," he ordered. "He's my prisoner."

Shotgun looked him squarely in the eye. "Like fun he is!" he bristled. "I ketched him. He's mine, and so's that two thousand dollar reward. I'm giving Ann half of it 'cause if it hadn't been for her scaring the daylights outa One-eye with that shot, I'd have been a gone gosling by now."

Dishpan Ann handed the coveted rifle to a bystander and threw her arms around the deputy's dusty neck. "Oh boy, oh boy, oh boy!" she shrilled. "Now I can start a beanery of my own!"

"About that rifle, Ann," Shotgun wheedled, "do I get to buy it? Seems like you'll be too busy to fool around with it anymore."

Dishpan Ann snatched the rifle from the bystander and handed it to Shotgun. "Take it," she cried. "It's a gift, from me to you."

The Wells-Fargo manager appeared on the scene and said to the sheriff, "About that team of trotters Shotgun hitched to the stagecoach—we'll buy 'em to replace the dead leaders."

"Well, that settles that," the sheriff observed happily, as Andy Hackem, the barber, nudged his elbow. "And what's your trouble, Andy?" he inquired magnanimously. "Oh, yeah, now I remember —that pyanner."

"Yes, that piano," the barber repeated. "I reckon I'm gonna hang on to it, Sam. They's a fellow drops in occasionally who can play it a bit, and the boys like to gather round and sing "Seeing Nellie Home." It's proving a purty good advertisement."

The sheriff heaved a tremendous sigh, and then puffed out his chest. Looking squarely at his deputy he observed grandiloquently, "That's what I call engineerin' three deals all to oncet. That takes brains."

Shotgun Shadwell once more looked him squarely in the eye. "Brains!" he sneered, and spat in the dust.

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One Very Good Amigo

By CLIFTON ADAMS

When Texas Ranger Matthew Duquesne took the trail of a wanted bandit on the border, he had a newspaperman along for company!

THEY came out of the hills suddenly and the town lay spread out below them, unbelievably quiet and cold in the first light of dawn. The two men had ridden all night and exhaustion showed in their heavy-lidded eyes and on their slack faces. They had come all the way from the Salt Fork country to get here, this part of Texas along the border which still was more Mexican than Texas.

But their journey was almost over. Down there somewhere, if the ranger's information was correct, there was a man named Jose Alverez who had four thousand dollars of Texas money. And Matthew Duquesne of the Texas Rangers had come to get him.

Of the two riders, Duquesne was the one people always noticed first. He was a big man, standing over six feet, saddle-lean and powerful. He was an ambitious man, having climbed all the way from cor-

poral to captain in the three years that he had been with the company. And after this job—if everything went well—it would be Major Duquesne.

The other rider, Sam Logan, was a quiet-eyed little man whose one hundred and fifty-some pounds seemed slightly frail beside the big Duquesne. Logan wasn't a ranger at all, but a newspaper reporter. He had ridden with Custer shortly before Little Big Horn, and it was said that he knew more about soldiering than most generals.

HOWEVER that might be, Duquesne would rather have been on the job alone. And, anyway, this wasn't a battle they were heading into, it was merely a routine check of information that might or might not lead into an arrest. Duquesne straightened his easy lounge into what was almost a military erectness and nodded down at the town.

"Well, there it is," he said. "We might as well see if Alverez is down there."

Logan started suddenly, almost asleep in the saddle. Even with Custer he hadn't ridden day and night, the way Duquesne liked to ride. He grinned sheepishly.

"I must have dozed off. Well, let's be going."

They rode silently, and slowly each man slipped back into the world of his own unknowable thoughts. Duquesne studied the reporter without seeming to do so. He didn't especially like or dislike the little man—but there was a certain, uncomfortable knowledge that his fortune as a ranger depended heavily on what Logan thought of him. The Old Man—the ranger's major—had made that clear enough. When the Old Man stepped down he wanted a good man to take his place. Duquesne's record alone made him the logical choice—but, for some reason unknown to Duquesne, the record had not been enough.

But Duquesne knew one thing. The rangers didn't need publicity—in the newspapers or anywhere else. To report a completely routine job wasn't the reason Logan had been called to ride with him. More likely it was to size Duquesne up and then make his personal recommendation to the major.

Well, Duquesne thought, Logan would see how a ranger went about his job. He would see why Duquesne's company was the most feared outfit in Southwest Texas.

The town that had seemed so amazingly clean from the hills began to reveal itself as it really was. There was a rutted clay street and a scattering of shoddy adobie huts, and at the end of the street there was the inevitable box-like church with its wooden cross standing against a steel sky. The place was dirty and shabby, and a high sour smell peculiar to all border towns hung over everything. A high-wheeled cart jolted into the street and crawled away to the west—the town was beginning to come to life. Old women with black shawls over their heads appeared in the early morning, all moving in the direction of the church.

It had seemed senseless to Logan, riding all night only to come into the town at this unearthly hour. But Duquesne had a reason for everything. They rode straight for the church, then the ranger swung his horse over to one side and dismounted.

The reporter smiled wearily. "I didn't know you were a religious man, Captain."

Duquesne moved his horse back and leaned against the side of the building, where he could see the entrance of the church but could not be seen himself.

"I'm not," he said as he began leisurely to roll a cigarette. "But Jose Alverez is. All Mexicans are. With a little luck we can pick him up right here, this morning, before he gets wind that we're looking for him."

Logan dropped down from the saddle. He was incredibly tired and he wondered if Duquesne ever slept. "I'm beginning to understand how you got your perfect record," he said. "You never let a man get away, do you?"

Duquesne smiled faintly and held a match to his cigarette. "I follow orders," he said.

This time the orders were to bring in Jose Alverez. Twenty missions without once coming back empty-handed—that was his record. That was the way he got to be captain, and that was the way he would get to be major.

They waited, and a sullen red sun rose from behind the church and beat at the town. Old women, girls, men—they all shuttled in and out of the church. But not Jose Alverez. "It looks like Jose lost his religion," Logan said dryly.

Duquesne shook his head. "It was just a chance. It looks like we'll have to push it a little."

"What will it be now?" the reporter asked, hoping that at last the big ranger would be ready to rest a while. But that hope was short lived.

Duquesne said, "We'll go in and talk to the Padre."

The church was empty now except for a priest who knelt up front before a few flickering candles. Duquesne and Logan stood in the doorway blinking in the sudden gloom. Up high, soft light streamed through narrow windows and poured to the floor.

At last the priest arose and faced them. He was an old man wearing a long belted robe, the hood thrown back on his narrow shoulders. He smiled quietly and said, "Welcome, my sons."

Duquesne was conscious of the gun at his side. Reluctantly he unbuckled his cartridge belt and laid it over a bench. The two men walked down to the altar where the priest was waiting, their spurs making frivolous silver sounds in the sober silence of the building.

"We're looking for a man called Jose Alverez," Duquesne said bluntly. "He's wanted for robbing a government stage to the north of here. Do you know such a man, Padre?"

THE old man's eyes widened. "Surely, my son, you are mistaken," he said.

"Then you don't know this man?"

The Padre nodded his head dumbly. "Jose—yes, senor, I know Jose. He comes to my church. He is a good man. . . ."

Duquesne smiled inwardly. He had been wise in coming to the Padre. Who else in this country could a man believe?

"Padre, we want to know where this Jose Alverez can be found," he said gently.

The old man hesitated, and Duquesne showed his badge. At last the Padre spoke weakly:

"The last house to the west," he said. "It has a skinny little blackjack tree in the yard. But, senor, why do you think this thing of Jose?"

That was the strange part of the affair —the way they had learned of Alverez. Two days ago a letter had arrived at ranger headquarters stating simply that Jose Alverez was one of the bandits, and that he still had the stolen money. It was not the usual thing, but it was not unheard of for one outlaw to make off with the loot and have his disgruntled partners turn him over to the law. At any rate, such letters were not taken lightly by the rangers.

But Duquesne did not bother to explain. "Thank you, Padre," he said, then he turned and walked out of the church, stopping only to retrieve his cartridge belt and gun.

The house was only a short ride from the church. A limp, indolent-eyed man sat in the scant shade of the blackjack tree picking his teeth with the needle point of a knife. He looked up and grinned as Duquesne and Logan hitched their horses and came toward him.

"Are you Jose Alverez?" Duquesne said.

"No, senor." The man pointed with his knife toward the house. "My *amigo*, Jose, he is in there." Then his grin widened to show an amazing row of flashing white teeth. "Even now, senor, here is Jose."

Duquesne turned and knew that he was looking at the man he had come for. He was big—almost two hundred pounds, fat-faced with the V shaped scar over the right eye. But somehow Duquesne had expected something different. This man walked woodenly, his eyes slow-witted, almost stupid. Only after he got closer did Duquesne see that it was worry or fear that made his eyes seem that way.

"You are Jose Alverez?" Duquesne asked.

The man looked at him blankly. *"Si, senor."*

There was something about the man that made Duquesne uneasy. There was no fight in him.

"Keep him covered," the ranger said to Logan. "I'll go search the house."

The big Alverez raked his fingers through his hair as if to clear the fog away. "This 'search the house'," he said flatly. "I do not understand, senor."

"Do you understand a stage robbery, or a canvas bag holding four thousand dollars?" Duquesne said dryly.

Alverez shook his head dumbly. But slowly his eyes brightened. Then suddenly he slapped his fat face.

"Dios mio! No! . . . Yes! One minute,

senor, we see!"

He wheeled before Duquesne could stop him. Duquesne's .45 jumped into his hand as the Mexican disappeared through the door of his hut. Alverez appeared again almost immediately. He had a bag in his hand, a gray canvas bag stenciled and still padlocked.

"This, senor, is what you wish?" he asked.

Duquesne stared. That was it, but he hadn't expected Alverez to give it up without a fight. It was almost too easy. It wouldn't make much of story for Logan to write up in his newspaper.

HE TOOK the bag in his left hand, his gun still on Alverez. "Logan, get the handcuffs out of my saddle bag," he said. "It looks like the job is over."

The Mexican's eyes grew wide. "No, senor! I have done nothing."

It was an old story, and for Duquesne it didn't even rate an answer.

"Senor, you must believe me," Alverez said. "I rob nobody. That," he pointed to the money bag, "I find. All covered with dust where some person had lost it. I say to myself, 'Jose Alverez, some person has lost this thing. You must give it to the proper authority'. And that is what I do, even now, to you, senor!"

Logan came back with the handcuffs. "I don't suppose you knew there was money in that bag," he said sarcastically to the Mexican.

Alverez looked puzzled. "Money? No, senor. I say to myself, 'Jose Alverez, in this bag there is something, but it does not belong to you.' So I do not open it."

The reporter's dry voice went on, "Don't you think you waited a little long to turn it over to the authorities?"

Alverez rubbed his hand over his face. "I forget," he said. "I, Jose Alverez, have much worry. I forget."

Duquesne didn't understand why he bothered to listen to him. He had heard a lot of stories, but this was the worst. He turned wearily to the reporter.

"All right, let's take him in—" He broke off suddenly.

A girl appeared in the doorway of Alverez's house and called softly.

"Jose! Jose, come!"

Alverez started backing away. "Senor . . ." He made a helpless gesture. He turned his back on Duquesne's gun, and for a moment the lawman only stared.

The girl—she was beautiful. Not merely pretty, or shapely. She had the rare kind of beauty that Mexican girls sometimes attain and the effect was startling.

By the time Duquesne recovered Alverez had disappeared into the hut again. The lawman cursed explosively. A half a dozen jumps carried him to the door and he burst through with his gun ready.

But there was no need of a gun. For then he knew why Alverez had not come to church that morning. And he knew the reason for the worry in the man's eyes.

A small boy, perhaps five years old, was lying against the far wall of the hut's single room. Even in the dim light Duquesne could see that his face was flushed with fever, and red fingers of danger were reaching out from under the bandages on his swollen leg. Logan came in and stood in the doorway.

"Good lord," the reporter said hoarsely, "it's blood poison."

Duquesne discovered that he still had his gun in his hand. He put it away. "Not yet," he said. "But it will be by morning if something isn't done."

The girl was Alverez's wife. Her eyes told that. The two of them stared helplessly at the boy, and then at Duquesne.

"Senor," Alverez implored softly, "you see my Juanito, he is not well. Maria and myself, we know little of such things. Please, senor, can you help us?"

Duquesne swore to himself. He liked things clear-cut and simple. A man did wrong—the law arrested him. But he could not ignore the boy staring at him with hurt eyes. He walked over and placed a hand on the boy's forehead. It was hot. He undid the crude bandages around his leg. The flesh was red and angry-looking.

AT LAST he spoke, without looking around. "Alverez, have you got a prayer book?"

"*Si, senor,*" the man said puzzled.

"Bring it here."

From beneath a tiny altar where a candle burned he got the book. Duquesne flattened Alverez's big hand against the worn pages.

"Do you swear on this book that you won't try to run away, that you'll go

peacefully with me when I've done what I can do for the boy?"

Alverez nodded eagerly. "*Si,* I swear this thing! Now you will help my Juanito?"

"We'll see," Duquesne said flatly. "Logan, go out and look in my saddlebags. There's some soap and iodine and salves somewhere. Senora, take those bandages and boil them."

The reporter smiled faintly, and Duquesne thought he could guess what thoughts lay behind that smile. It would make a fine story to tell the major—a ranger putting an outlaw on his honor not to run away! The lawman turned back to the boy. Well, he thought, the reporter could go jump in the river.

Carefully, Duquesne washed the infected area with soap and water while the boy stared mutely with those big eyes. Maria and Alverez watched anxiously as he began to open the small bottle of iodine. But Logan sat on the floor, with his back to the wall, looking on quietly, without comment.

Duquesne said, "How goes it, *muchacho?*"

The boy nodded dumbly.

"This will hurt some, Juanito. Yell if you feel like it." He swabbed the iodine into the infection with a piece of boiled cloth. The boy jerked forward. But he bit his teeth together and no sound escaped him. Duquesne mopped his face with a damp rag. "You've got nerve, Juanito. I like men with nerve. You're going to be all right."

Only time would tell if he was lying.

Then there was nothing to do but wait. After a while the first shock of pain wore off and Juanito relaxed. Maria knelt beside him, there at the blanket-covered mound of earth that served as a bed, her lips moving silently.

"Senor," Jose said hopefully, "Juanito, he will be well now?"

If blood poison hadn't already set in. If his fever didn't go up. If a hundred other things didn't happen.

"He'll be all right," Duquesne said.

Outside the sun was beginning to fall, shooting the sky with red. Logan's chin dropped to his chest, and in a minute he was asleep, sitting there on the floor, with his back to the wall. Duquesne felt fatigue beginning to sap his own strength. He sat on the floor beside the reporter, and that was the last he remembered.

He didn't know how many hours he slept. He awoke suddenly, half expecting Alverez to be gone. But the big man was still there, sitting beside the bed, staring at his son. There was darkness outside, and the room was lighted only by two flickering candles. Duquesne got up and felt of Juanito's forehead. It was still hot. Those ugly red streaks still reached out from the infected area.

Duquesne felt helpless and suddenly angry. "If you had only taken the boy to a doctor!" he said. "There are good doctors in San Sabino. Why didn't you take him?"

Alverez looked at him blankly. "But, senor, we are poor people. And the doctors in San Sabino must have money."

Duquesne wheeled on the man. "You had four thousand dollars of good Texas money that you took off the stage!"

Alverez's mouth fell open. "*Dios mios,*" he murmured. "I did not know." He dropped his head and studied his big hands. "Senor," he said at last, "I, Jose Alverez, am an honest man—but even so I would have given the money to the doctors to save my Juanito. But I did not know what was in the bag. I did not know."

DUQUESNE felt the anger go out of him. He went back to his place beside Logan and watched the flickering candle-light dance in the sod walls of the hut. The reporter was awake now, but the men did not speak. Duquesne tried not to think. A lawman wasn't supposed to think. He did what he was told, arrested those he was told to arrest, and that was all. But over and over in his mind he kept hearing Alverez saying, *I did not know.*

Somehow, one hour dragged into another, but the boy showed no change. Duquesne's nerves became raw and the sight of Alverez's dumb face irritated him. Every so often he would arise and feel of Juanito's forehead. It was always the same, burning beneath his hand while the boy slept fitfully.

Then toward dawn, Duquesne tried again. Miraculously, the fever was gone! Juanito was sleeping normally and peacefully. The lawman touched Maria.

"Get some rest, senora," he said. "The boy is all right now."

Abruptly, he turned and went outside in the cool of the early morning.

After a while the reporter came out and stood beside him. "You did a good job on the boy," Logan said mildly.

It had been luck. They both knew that. And maybe Maria's praying.

"What do we do now?" Logan asked.

"We came here with orders to arrest a man," Duquesne said harshly. "We're going to arrest him."

The reporter rolled a cigarette with elaborate unconcern, then struck a match and stared into the flame.

"Is he guilty?" he said finally.

"I'm not the judge and jury," the lawman said.

But they were both thinking the same thing—Alverez was innocent. But he wouldn't have a chance if they took him back for trial. Who would believe that Alverez had "found" the money that the real bandits had somehow lost in getting away? Who would believe that he "hadn't known" what was in that bag, and had "forgotten" to turn it over to the authorities?

Duquesne knew it was the truth, because Alverez hadn't even thought of the money when it could have saved Juanito's life. But no judge or jury would believe it. They would only see the evidence piled up against him, and that was enough to make any court in Texas declare him guilty.

That dry, sarcastic voice of the reporter spoke once more, "I'll bet that perfect record of yours gets to be hard to live with sometimes."

Duquesne had no answer. It was his job and he did it the best way he knew.

It was not easy facing Alverez. The big man came out beaming, his eyes bright with gratefulness.

"Juanito's face is no longer hot with fever," he said. "I give you many thanks, senor. A million *gracias*."

"Forget it!" Duquesne said sharply.

Alverez's enthusiasm paled, but only for a moment. He went on, "Now I keep my promise, senor. I go with you to the authorities. I will explain about the way I find the money, and then I will return to Maria and Juanito." Then it occurred to him for the first time. "Senor," he said,

[*Turn page*]

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As a first step in their progress toward the Power that Knowledge gives, Mr. Dingle wants to send to readers of this paper a 9,000-word treatise. He says the time is here for it to be released to the Western World, and offers to send it, free of cost or obligation, to sincere readers of this notice. For your free copy, address The Institute of Mentalphysics, 213 South Hobart Blvd., Dept. A-18, Los Angeles 4, Calif. Readers are urged to write promptly as only a limited number of the free books have been printed.

"The authorities, they will believe me, won't they?"

Logan smiled without humor. "I've been wondering how you would answer this question."

Perhaps it was that smile that made Duquesne answer the way he did. He looked squarely at the Mexican.

"Yes, Jose, they'll believe you," he said.

Maybe, Duquesne admitted, he would regret saying that, but it was almost worth it just to see the smile drop from the reporter's face.

THE sun rose and beat angrily at the small town, and Duquesne waited. For what, he didn't know. There was only one thing that he was sure of—innocent or guilty, he was taking Alverez in.

The reporter tried once to get him to change his mind. He came out to where Duquesne stood, his face grim.

"Well," he said, "are you going to take the prisoner in?"

"Would you want me to leave him here?" the lawman said.

"He's innocent," Logan said. "We both know that. But he won't have a chance if he comes to trial—a prosecutor would tear his case to shreds."

Duquesne saw that it was no use, and anyway he was never much good at explaining things. If he had the real bandits, that would give Alverez a chance to clear himself. But the bandits would be across the border into Mexico by now.

As the morning dragged on even Alverez began to wonder what they were waiting on. Duquesne didn't know himself. He found a small shade by the side of the hut and watched the sun rise higher. After a while the indolent-eyed man came to sit under the blackjack tree, picking his teeth with his knife.

Noon came and Maria came out to offer Duquesne tortillas and fried beans. The man under the blackjack tree stopped picking his teeth and watched the girl with hungry eyes. Juanito, Maria said, was much better. She was very happy. She would be happier still when Jose returned from explaining to the authorities.

If Jose returned, Duquesne thought darkly. But he ate the tortillas and beans, and when Maria returned for the plate the man under the tree followed her again with those eyes of his. "That man, is he some kin of yours?" the lawman said.

"Oh no, senor," Maria said. "That is Marcos. Every day he sits there under the tree. He is Jose's friend."

But no friend of hers, Maria's eyes told him. Duquesne said, "I see." But he was beginning to wonder. And the more he wondered the more things fell into place. Maria was very beautiful, and the man's eyes were very hungry.

"Maria, tell Jose I want to talk to him," Duquesne said.

The girl's eyes were puzzled. But she said, *"Si, senor."* She went back into the hut, and in a moment Jose came out.

Duquesne nodded toward the tree. "Jose," he said, "tell me about your friend out there."

"Ah," Alverez grinned. "That is my very good amigo, Marcos." He turned and called *"Que tal, amigo?"*

The man grinned widely and waved with his knife.

"He likes me very much," Jose said. "Every day he comes to sit under my tree." Then the big man's face sobered, and with his fingers he made a circular motion near his forehead. "But Marcos is a little bit crazy, I think. Every day under the tree. . ." He shrugged.

Duquesne said, "Listen to me, Jose. Maybe we will play a little trick on your very good amigo, Marcos. . ."

EARLY afternoon Duquesne and Logan saddled their horses in preparation to leave the town, and under the blackjack tree Marcos was grinning wider than ever. Jose and Maria came outside to watch, and from the corner of his eye Duquesne glimpsed Marcos as his grin began to fall. The two men pulled their horses around and waved briefly to Alverez and his wife.

They waved back happily. *"Adios, amigos!"* they called.

Marcos' eyes widened in alarm. He got suddenly to his feet and hurried over to stop Duquesne and Logan before they could ride away.

"Senors," he called breathlessly. "One *momento!*"

"Senors," Marcos gasped as they brought their horses to a stop. "A thousand pardons—but you are rangers?"

"How did you know that?" Duquesne asked.

Marcos grinned weakly. "I guess, senor. But why do you not take Jose with you. He is a very bad one, Jose. He is a *bandido!*"

Duquesne smiled faintly. The reporter's face told nothing.

"I tell the truth, senor," Marcos insisted quickly. "A stage coach was robbed to the north of our village—the news is everywhere. With my own eyes I have seen the stolen money in Jose's house."

"Did you see where he got the money?" Duquesne asked carefully.

"*Si, senor,*" Marcos went on eagerly. "With my own eyes I saw him pick it up in the road. It was covered with dust. No doubt he placed it there with the purpose of claiming that he had found it. A very clever man, senor. All *bandidos* are clever."

JOSE growled in anger. But Duquesne could smile now. Marcos probably had been sitting under that blackjack tree for a great many months, feasting his eyes on Maria, and wondering how he could rid himself of her husband. Writing the letter to the rangers had been a stroke of brilliance. It would be a great convenience to Marcos if they put Maria's husband in prison. But Marcos had overlooked one thing—his own story of how Jose found the money, along with the letter, would be the thing that would set Jose free.

Duquesne looked at the reporter's blank face. "All right, Jose," he said. "We will go to the authorities now. And we'll also take your very good amigo, Marcos."

On the trail that night Duquesne and Logan took turns watching the prisoners. The night was still and the reporter sat by the campfire, punching it and watching sparks shoot up in the darkness. At last he spoke.

"There's something I'd better tell you, Captain. It was the major's idea that I come along on this trip. The old man has some funny notions about the law enforcement business. He wants the man who takes his place to have a good record—but not *too* good."

Duquesne knew what he was getting at. Some lawmen had the reputation for framing a man just to get the credit for an arrest. He got up quickly and strode away from the campfire to hide the anger on his face. He hadn't framed Jose. But that's the way it looked to the reporter. That's the way the major would hear it.

Duquesne tried to tell himself that he didn't care what the reporter thought. But that wasn't the truth. He cared plenty. He wanted the major's job more than he had ever wanted anything—but the blank-faced little reporter would see that he never got it.

Suddenly, Duquesne turned on the man. Anyway, he would have the satisfaction of speaking his mind. "All right," he said tightly, "I'm bringing an innocent man in to stand trial. That's the way I see my job. I'd do it the same way if I had it to go through all over again. . . ."

Strangely, Logan was grinning. "But that piece of work you did on Juanito, that wasn't your job," he said. Then he looked at the glowering Marcos. "And not many lawmen feel bound to supply their prisoners with a chance to free themselves."

The reporter stood up and took one last punch at the campfire. "I don't think you've got anything to worry about—" and then he added "—Major."

HEADLINERS IN NEXT MONTH'S ISSUE!

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THE BLOODY YEARS

A Jim Hatfield Novel by JACKSON COLE

LONG SAM RIDES THE RIVER

An Outlaw Littlejohn Story by LEE BOND

SIX-GUN SAWBONES

A True Famous Texas Rangers Story by HAROLD PREECE

(Continued from page 9)

one of the feudists, but Commodore Perry Owens, newly-elected Sheriff of Apache County, to the north of Pleasant Valley.

Apache County folks didn't take this new Sheriff very seriously—not at first. His get-up amused them. He wore long hair, like an Indian, that hung down over his shoulders. He was fond of gaudy cowboy clothes. Further doubts of his ability were aroused by his uncommon habit of wearing a Colt on the left side, butt forward.

Sheriff Owens had barely pinned on his badge when Andy Blevans showed up in his bailiwick and bragged in a Holbrook saloon that he had killed John Tewksbury and one Bill Jacobs two days before.

The new Sheriff heard about the boast. He had that rustling warrant for Andy Blevans, known in Holbrook as Andy Cooper.

With Winchester and Colt

With a Winchester in his hand and Colt on left hip, Sheriff Owens started his manhunt. He sighted Andy, just as he was saddling up, about to leave town. Andy spotted the stalking lawman and slunk into a house.

Right here was where Sheriff Owens proved himself a man of genuine courage. He was a former Texas trail driver. He had met up with bad hombres and braggarts before. He walked onto the porch and called for Andy to come out.

Andy refused the invitation. Peering through a window, the Sheriff saw that the wanted man wasn't alone. There were three men in there, well armed. One was John Blevans.

All at once, then, Andy covered the Sheriff from a doorway. In the same instant, as though by prearranged plan, John Blevans thrust a gun through another door. Long-haired Sheriff Owens was in a bad spot.

He looked Andy in the eye and said:

"I want you. I have a warrant."

"A warrant, what for?" asked Andy.

"Horse stealing. Come out at once."

"I won't go."

Fast Shooting

That dispensed with the preliminaries. Andy fired. He missed. But the Sheriff's bullet hit Andy hard. John Blevans fired, also missed the officer but his slug hit Andy's horse, in front of the house. Why both these tough, seasoned gunmen missed at pointblank range was hard to account for.

The Sheriff swung his Winchester on John Blevans and drilled him through the shoulder.

The third man, Sam Blevans, charged out of the house with a six-gun. He wasn't given time to shoot. Owens' Winchester belched hellfire again and Blevans staggered back inside to die.

It wasn't over yet. Sam, aged 16, the kid brother of the Blevans tribe, grabbed up dying Andy's gun and rushed out. A bullet through the heart chopped him down. Coolly, Owens reloaded his smoking Winchester and took charge of three dead or dying prisoners, one wounded.

By the summer of 1892 (when the Lincoln County War was raging up in Wyoming), only one Tewksbury, Ed, and one Graham, Tom, were left of the original bunch. Settlers began to breathe easy, thinking the 10-year feud was finally over.

A Famous Case

One hot August day, when driving a wagon past a mesquite clump down in Salt River Valley, Tom Graham was waylaid and killed. Ed Tewksbury and a sidekick, John Rhodes, were arrested and charged with the murder.

A justice at Tempe dismissed the case against Rhodes but Tewksbury was held, charged and convicted. For nearly three years he was in jail, while lawyers appealed the case. It was finally dismissed. But Ed con-

tracted tuberculosis during his long imprisonment. He died of the disease in 1904, after a short tenure of office as a deputy constable in Globe.

The killing of Tom Graham closed the Tewksbury-Graham feud. Only a few surviving old-timers under the Tonto Rim remember it. But even when they are gone, that long reign of range terror will not be forgotten. Because it is deep-rooted in countless Western stories, songs and legends which will never die.

—CAPTAIN STARR

OUR NEXT ISSUE

IN THE Panhandle of Texas, on the north bank of the South Canadian River, in the days of the famous cattle trails, grew a town called Tascosa, which was to enjoy the dubious honor of being known as the "Cowboy Capital of the Plains." And nobody denied that Tascosa was considerable of a town. It had numerous saloons, hotels, livery stables, a brass band, a fire department—so called—a school, two graveyards, a newspaper, hopes for a railroad and some talk of building a church.

It began with a blacksmith shop and a general merchandise store, with a saloon soon to follow. A northbound cattle-and-freight trail crossed the Canadian at the old Tascosa ford and Tascosa grew to be a regular stopping-over place for teamsters and cowhands.

Buffalo hunters and other riders of the High Plains swelled the influx of visitors. Folks of questionable antecedents and dubious futures found Tascosa a fine squatting ground. A law-and-order cleanup in Mobeetie some miles to the east served to swell the disorderly element of the cow-town.

Even a gentleman known as Billy the Kid, with a choice band of followers, dropped in, raised hell and shoved a chunk under a corner, but soon departed for parts unknown. Tascosa on the prod was a mite too salty even for the most notorious killer the Southwest ever knew.

But there was one man this wild and woolly Plains town couldn't face. And that was Jim Hatfield, famous Texas Ranger.

Jackson Cole, in his new novel, coming next issue, THE BLOODY YEARS takes Hatfield, nemesis of Western badmen, to Tascosa in an attempt to uncover and put to a stop the

[*Turn page*]

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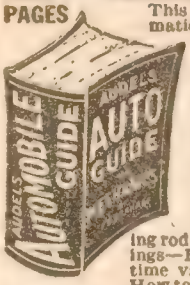

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killings, rustlings, stage robberies, and general depredations that had aroused the better element of Tascosa and the surrounding ranchland—even extending down to the Palo Duro Canyon country, that slash of nature's wonderland in the heart of the Panhandle.

Hatfield had seen the Panhandle country before, when he tangled a bit in the past with an outlaw named Carlos Moro. Moro, he was certain, must be dead by now.

As usual, Captain Bill McDowell, head of the Rangers in Austin, had been brief in his instructions to Jim. Told him he had nothing definite to work on, just go to Tascosa and see what the general situation was before attempting to track down the head of the Black Riders, the name of the gang causing so much ruckus in the section. Strangely, Hatfield was attacked by three unknown gunmen before he reached Tascosa. This seemed peculiar, inasmuch he was certain no one knew of his mission.

But the main object of Jim's attention was how the cattle and sheep rustled from the Palo Duro Canyon country seemingly disappeared in thin air after leaving an easily followed trail. He knew the northern routes westward to New Mexico were carefully guarded by special deputies and volunteers from the various spreads. Little attention was given to the southern routes, for the old buffalo and Indian traces vanished into a pitiless desert country, a region bewildering to the brain, choking to the throat, where lips parched and tongues swelled.

Low sand hills, absolutely barren of vegetation, waterless, white as snow, extended for miles. Altogether too many miles for a fast-traveling herd to cross without water.

The Indians used to make it across, somehow, Hatfield knew. And when he saw that the old buffalo trails led to the edge of the desert, he was willing to bet that they didn't end there, for buffalo didn't amble along and then stop altogether for no good reason. Naturally there were no signs of the animal trails on the desert. Drifting sand had filled them up long ago.

Hatfield knew the buffalo had a definite reason for crossing the desert—new feeding grounds at the foot of the mountains. But they would never have attempted such a trip without water on the way. As Jim mused over the problem, he decided that there must be water out there somewhere, otherwise the rustlers could not use this route—assuming that they did when driving stolen herds

to an illegal market.

Hatfield's work was cut out for him, particularly when it came to analyzing the human element of the case. What part did rough and tough "Bull" Lawson, rancher, play in this mystery? Was handsome Ramon Bera, another rancher, all he seemed to be? And finally, did the ghost of Carlos Moro haunt the wild canyons of the Palo Duro country?

Jim Hatfield unveils the mysteries of THE BLOODY YEARS in the next issue of TEXAS RANGERS. For your own enjoyment, look forward to this quick-paced novel of ghosts that came out of the past, and of herds that disappeared right in front of the Lone Wolf's very eyes! It is Jim Hatfield, crack Texas Ranger, at his best!

In the next issue, too, there will be a Long Sam Littlejohn story—LONG SAM RIDES THE RIVER, by Lee Bond.

Poking into a town full of people in broad daylight wasn't Long Sam's idea of playing safe, particularly when he didn't know from hour to hour the whereabouts of Joe Fry, deputy United States marshal who was always on his tail. In fact, when Long Sam went up the bank steps and into the lobby at what he thought was the behest of his old friend Ed Scott, banker, an almost frightened feeling swept over him. However, Sam was no one to let down a friend—but had he known what was in store for him in the banker's private office, he might have thought twice before heeding the call of a friend.

Read in the next issue of TEXAS RANGERS the trap that was set for Long Sam—by Joe Fry, naturally—and how Sam outwits the human bulldog who is always at his heels!

There will also be the usual entertaining variety of thrilling short stories and fact articles on the West in the next issue of TEXAS RANGERS. For a real session of interesting reading, be on hand!

OUR MAIL BAG

HI, ALL you correspondents to the Mail Bag—and a hearty hello to everybody! We're glad to be with you again.

We've just slit a batch of envelopes with letters in them, picked up a bundle of postcards, all addressed to the editor, and we certainly had a lot of fun perusing them. It may be amazing to you good readers, but

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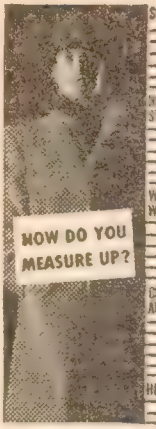

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we sure learn a lot about what and what not to publish from reading your missives. After all, it's your magazine, for you're the folks that buy it. So here's a cross-section of what you've thought of it recently, in letters both pro and con:

I enjoy *Texas Rangers* and I wish to say that it's a very fine book. I also enjoy Long Sam, by Lee Bond—but if they don't get rid of Joe Fry (who spoils a good story) I shall just stop reading it.—*Robert McFarland, Geneva, Ohio.*

Jackson Cole is getting a bit stale. Why can't he manage some new plots? Same old mining stuff! And his girl friend isn't mentioned any more. Somebody kidnap her?—*Edward E. Hall, Chula Vista, Cal.*

I read every issue of your wonderful book and I want to comment on it. Tell me, has anyone ever known of a man, traveling like Jim Hatfield, not to meet a few girls? And isn't it only natural he meets the one girl he falls in love with? Although there are few Rangers left, most of the F.B.I. and undercover men are married, or else have sweethearts somewhere. So I wish people would stop making with a lot of nonsense and get down to facts.—*Norma Jean Morton, Macon, Mississippi.*

I sure do like to read your stories. I read every one I can get. If there is a real Jim Hatfield, I sure would love for him to send me one of his pictures. Also, I want a picture of his horse, and a real good one. I know all the good work that Jim Hatfield does and hope that he will live to keep all this work going.—*Mellie L. Bunch, Oliver Springs, Tenn.*

I have lived in the Big Bend country that Jackson Cole speaks of so much. I made one trapping trip there that I will always remember —down in the Chisos Mountains and near Santa Helena Canyon. I ran out of food, lived off jaybirds about two weeks without salt, got poisoned and like to died alone in the Chisos peaks of Texas. Also, I left some traps set in the mountains that I never did return to get. I wonder if they were every found?—*Casey Tyler, Ackerman, Mississippi.*

If Jackson Cole keeps up with Jim as a solitary Lone Wolf, he will be writing stories that will begin to fall into a pattern—of the kind where a man can only get out of so many situations.—*Pvt. Walter Barnaby, Fort Dix, New Jersey.*

Have been a regular reader for six years, and out of your many publications *Texas Rangers* is my favorite. In my opinion Jim Hatfield should work alone, since his nickname is the Lone Wolf.—*Leola Petersen, Omaha, Nebraska.*

Well, that just about does it for this issue, folks. Please keep on writing to the editor, and the more mail, the better. Kindly address your letters and postcards to The Editor,

TEXAS RANGERS, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, New York. Thanks for being with us . . . and *Adios.*

—THE EDITOR.

SCOURGE OF THE SAN SABA

(Concluded from page 61)

At seventeen, he'd been the first noted Ranger detective. True, it would be many years before the detective rank, as such, would be instituted in the force. But Will Preece was the forerunner of all the crack sleuths of that great body of fighting men since those dim days of the dim trails.

When he retired from the service, a Texas editor commented that the youngest member of Captain Connor's company had not only smashed the gun rings that armed the wild Comanches but proved an excellent lawman as well. Still under voting age, he'd also served four towns as temporary peace officer till the communities could incorporate and elect their own lawmen. He'd rounded up more than a hundred thieves and rustlers. But he'd never fired a shot at any man he could persuade to surrender peacefully.

During the Civil War, Little Will, like the rest of the Preece connection, remained loyal to his cousin, Abe Lincoln. He became a lieutenant in the Texas Union forces, for his part of the state defied the Confederacy. He fought gallantly on a score of battlefields with his brothers standing shoulder to shoulder beside him.

After the war, he became a deputy sheriff of Williamson County, Texas. He was trailing a gang of horsethieves when he died from the accidental discharge of his pistol on a day in the late 70's.

His son, "Pecos Will" Preece later became an outstanding officer on the bullet-splashed Texas-New Mexico border. Pecos Will was proud to own Little Will as his father. I'm proud to claim him as my great-uncle.

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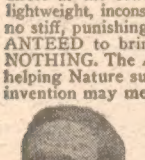

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